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Street Smarts: Oakville, the town born from timbers



Liz Belford, owner of the Rosewater Spa in Oakville: "I just don't think there's a better place to live."
Aaron Lynett/National Post

By Suzanne Wintrob
Special to National Post

Toronto has a love affair with the condo, with 28,466 new-build units purchased in 2011. Thousands more are planned. Suite size, price, amenities and architecture are important, but more and more, a building's neighbourhood is being considered the ultimate draw. The 12th part of a lengthy series examining the GTA's new condo 'hoods.

It's a cool but sunny weekday morning and Oakville's picturesque downtown is quiet. Only a handful of people are out walking, most with dogs. With little traffic, delivery men stop their trucks in the turning lanes and unload their wares from there. For a midtown 416er venturing to one of Canada's wealthiest neighbourhoods for the very first time, the silence and tranquility is almost eerie.

But, after chatting with the locals, gazing at the mansions and walking along the waterfront, it's easy to see why Oakville is a great place to live. The town's 182,520 residents love their surroundings and are proud of their heritage. And they are thoroughly engaged in the community, whether it's by supporting area retailers or attending the multitude of street festivals.

Much of the socializing happens along Lakeshore Avenue's downtown core, a charming few blocks reminiscent of Bloor West Village and The Kingsway. Seems it's much busier on the weekends because that's when the commuters are back in town, with families strolling the streets and tucking into the coffee shops and hip clothing and accessory stores with names such as Bluboho and Triple Flip. Yet things really get going for the annual parties, such as July's Midnight Madness when retailers, bands and performers spill into the streets. They also come out for the three-day sidewalk sale, the four-day summer jazz festival, the fall fashion show, the Santa Claus Parade and the Christmas tree lighting ceremony.

Dawn-Angela Seeley is a regular at the festivities. The British-born, South Africa-raised artist moved to Canada 22 years ago. Her first stop was North York, but 12 years ago, she turned her passion for art and travel into a business and decided Oakville would be the ideal locale.

"It is big enough to sustain a business and small enough to be very personal and intimate," says Ms. Seeley, who teaches art to children and adults and runs tours to Tuscany and Bordeaux. "It's got a real village mentality."

In fact, visitors are regularly reprimanded for calling Oakville a city when it's officially a town. Its roots date back to the early 1800s, when William Chisholm purchased 960 acres around the mouth of Sixteen Mile Creek from the Crown. According to his descendant George Chisholm, president of the Oakville Historical Society, William's intention was to establish a harbour and to harvest oak timber for the shipbuilding and sugar barrel trades (hence the name Oakville). He bought the land in 1827, set up a shipyard, and built a dam across the creek to provide water power for mills. William died in 1852, shortly after he went bankrupt, and five years later his son, George King Chisholm, became the first mayor of the Town of Oakville. The family property, called Erchless Estate after the Chisholm's castle in Scotland, still sits on the creek at the foot of Navy Street and operates as a museum.

As a waterfront town, Oakville has long been a nautical paradise. In the early days, schooners were made here to transport grain, coal and building materials. Some of the boats sailed as far as South Africa, Mr. Chisholm says. Later, it developed as a summer destination, with Torontonians boarding steamers to Oakville to spend lazy days in the town's tea houses or at the beach. They were so enamoured that many wealthy families built summer homes along the waterfront. In the 1950s, a Ford plant opened and things got busier. And, as they say, the rest is history. It's all celebrated every year at The Mayor's Picnic, complete with bands including the Oakville Wind Orchestra, which dates to 1866 and bills itself as Canada's oldest continuously operating community concert band.

In recent years, construction and planning has dominated the town. Old estate homes as well as smaller houses downtown have been bulldozed to make way for gated mansions. Many are owned by families who didn't grow up in Oakville but were attracted by the greenery, the waterfront and the space. They generally work in Toronto and commute by car or Go Train. Luxury condominiums are also getting play, with striking units on the waterfront and inland attracting those keen on staying in town but downsizing to smaller digs. Many are members of the local yacht clubs or head there for dinner, with the town's entire sailing community racing against each other throughout the summer.

Nancy Samchyk, 53, a project management consultant, spent her entire career working in downtown Toronto while living most of it in Oakville. Two decades ago, she and her partner, financial planner Donna Harrison, moved to a 3,000-square-foot house in north Oakville a short drive from the renowned Glen Abbey Golf Course. They were so smitten by the town that they soon sold their cottage and set up "our own little oasis" in the backyard. Heading toward retirement, the couple recently purchased a 1,530-sq.-ft., two-bedroom-plus-den waterfront suite at Bluwater Condominiums. Price tag: \$895,000.

"I've worked in Toronto's financial core, but there was always a sense of calmness coming back to Oakville," says Ms. Samchyk. "Even yesterday, I was downtown and I thought, 'Isn't it interesting how it really hasn't changed that much in the 20 years we've lived here?' There's a nice comfortable feeling about living here. We just love it. We toyed with the idea of living in Toronto because we do spend quite a bit of time downtown but honestly, coming back to Oakville is a great thing."

That's something Dana Anderson loves to hear. As director of planning services at the Town of Oakville, she is immersed in rolling out Vision 2057 — a roadmap for the future named to coincide with the town's bicentennial. The multi-layered undertaking includes an official plan called Livable Oakville that sets out how land will be developed for residential and commercial purposes as well as to preserve heritage and green space. The goal is to be "the most livable town in Canada." Ms. Anderson says several

new condo developers have already responded favourably to the city's new height, form and density guidelines, and residents have been involved every step of the way.

"You can have a million public consultations and open houses and you can convey that you've done all this great consultation, but if nobody shows up, is it really successful?" Ms. Anderson ponders. "Probably over 1,000 people were engaged in some part of the development of the [Vision 2057] policies — whether it was writing in as part of a residents' group or challenging information. We had phenomenal engagement from the public, right across the town."

Ms. Seeley likes that the municipality encourages residents to speak their minds. She says Mayor Rob Burton is "pretty open about planning" so she often attends meetings to have her voice heard. Now that she's so established in her adopted town, she couldn't imagine trading it for urban living.

"Oakville is a very calm place to be," she says. "I occasionally go into the city, but there's less and less need to."

Street Smarts: Four new Oakville condos

Liz Belford was born and raised in Oakville and has spent much of her life there. Eleven years ago, the 63-year-old grandma founded Rosewater Spa on downtown's Church Street and four years ago opened a second location in Burlington. In a few years Ms. Belford will have a third branch, but at that one she will live above her office. You see, she recently bought a 1,300-sq.-ft. unit at Bluwater Condominiums on the Oakville waterfront and will be in charge of the residents' spa services.

"I never dreamed I'd ever be able to live back on the water," says Ms. Belford, who resided for a time on Oakville's waterfront but spent the last little while inland. "Now my unit is so close to the water I could throw a ball in."

Though Ms. Belford has lived in Halifax and Europe, she always knew she would settle back in her hometown. Not just because of her roots, but because she finds it a peaceful, calm and friendly place. As she puts it: "I've earned my livelihood from Oakville so I feel enriched. I just don't think there's a better place to live."

Here's a sampling of what's on the go in Oakville:

Bluwater Condominiums

Three eight-storey buildings encompassing 204 units Builder Pemberton Group
Location Lakeshore and Burloak Suite Availability 85% sold. 615 to 1,920 sq. ft.

priced from the mid-\$300,000s Hot Tickets Water views from most suites with oversized terraces and balconies; spa services, caterer's kitchen, outdoor yoga terrace with meditation deck Status Under construction Occupancy Spring 2013 Contact 416-987-8800, bluwatercondos.com

Emporium at Joshua Creek

Two eight-storey buildings comprising 375 units total Builder Ashley Oaks Homes Location Dundas and Prince Michael Suite Availability Phase 1 south building: 75% sold, 1,000 to 1,650 sq. ft. priced from \$399,900 to \$922,900; Phase 2 north building: 40% sold, 608 to 2,415 sq. ft. priced from \$260,900 to \$1.37-million Hot Tickets Archway connects the buildings; condos and townhomes share party room, weight room, whirlpool, home theatre, games room and guest rooms Status Phase 1 complete, Phase 2 under construction Occupancy Phase 1 occupying now, Phase 2 November 2014 Contact 905-618-0660, emporiumcondominium.com

Rain Condominiums

Two 19- and 21-storey towers comprising 532 units Builder Empire Communities Location Kerr and Speers Suite Availability 346 to 1,030 sq. ft. priced from the mid-\$200,000s including two-storey lofts located along the building's podium Hot Tickets Contemporary urban exterior design has clean slender lines and emphasizes the raindrop motif with its balcony locations; amenities include indoor pool, exercise room, yoga and Pilates studio, sixth-floor outdoor terrace with barbecue and two pet-washing areas Status Actively selling Occupancy Starting March 2014 Contact 905-845-RAIN (7246), empirecommunities.com

Windermere Manor

Five storeys, 36 units Builder Matas Homes Location Lakeshore and Dorval Suite Availability 70% sold. 950 to 1,350 sq. ft. priced from \$499,900 Hot Tickets Roof top entertainment-workout complex dubbed "a play place for adults" Status Under construction with customizing available Occupancy December 2012 Contact 416-706-1389, windermere-manor.ca

—Suzanne Wintrob