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Street Smarts: The 905's new young street



Like many 905ers, Cathy Hong rarely goes south of Steeles Avenue. When she does, it's to get together with friends at the bars, restaurants and cinemas near Sheppard and Yonge. Darren Calabrese/National Post

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 15th part of a lengthy series examining the GTA's new condo 'hoods.

Like many 905ers, Cathy Hong rarely goes south of Steeles Avenue. When she does, it's to get together with friends at the bars, restaurants and cinemas near Sheppard and Yonge. Everything else the 30-year-old dentist needs is close by.

Since returning from dentistry school in Australia last year, Dr. Hong has been living with her parents in their Richmond Hill home. She works in Bowmanville and Newmarket so it's easy to hop on to Highway 404 to get there.

Recently, Dr. Hong decided to move out on her own. But she didn't want to venture far from home, let alone downtown where others her age tend to settle. Rather, she was keen on staying in the 905 because it's where she feels most comfortable. Coincidentally, her parents were also considering selling their house and buying to a condo.

When the family caught wind of the massive World On Yonge master-planned community just north of Steeles, comprising one million square feet of residential space, it fit just right. Dr. Hong's parents liked the neighbourhood because of the large Korean community, while she liked it because it meshed with her lifestyle.

"When I started making my own money, I wanted to start enjoying my single life," she explains. "I'm not a big fan of living in a crowded area, but I still want to be close to a city. Thornhill is close to North York and my friends while it's less crowded [than downtown]."

That sentiment resonates with many residents living in the Town of Richmond Hill, particularly those her age. The municipality has a young population compared to the rest of Ontario, with nearly half of the 191,623 residents between the ages of 20 and 49. Many grew up in the area and, like Dr. Hong, want to stay there as long as they can.

Take Mark Hebert. He was born at York Central Hospital (currently the largest employer in Richmond Hill) and grew up in one of the very first subdivisions. With only about 26,000 residents living in the Town at the time, little Mark's playground were the parks and farmers' fields and he traversed them by bicycle. With so few people, he and his parents Tom and Brenda Hebert found it easy to make friends.

"It was wonderful because you knew everybody," Ms. Hebert recalls. "The people you saw at soccer were the same ones at the swimming pool and the library. It was a very small village."

When her son grew up he moved around town, eventually settling near Leslie Street and Major Mackenzie Drive. Today the 36-year-old father of three runs Cosmo Music, founded 40 years ago by his father and now a 56,000-square-foot music emporium dubbed "the largest interactive musical instrument store on the planet." Besides selling and servicing instruments, the store has a roster of 2,400 students each week and loans more than 12,000 band instruments to

schools across southern Ontario. Customers come from around the corner and around the world.

Though Richmond Hill has grown tremendously since he was a child, Mr. Hebert still considers his hometown small. He sees many of his childhood friends and neighbours — he calls them the “old school Richmond Hill people” — at community events and personally knows Mayor Dave Barrow and many of the councillors.

The sense of community is evident throughout the town’s gathering spots, be it popular eateries such as Nino D’Averso Bakery and the Galaxy Restaurant (the mayor’s “breakfast place of choice”) or public events such as the winter carnival at Mill Pond or fireworks at Richmond Green park. Mr. Hebert is one of the organizers of the annual Five Senses Festival (this year on Aug. 17–18) featuring live entertainment and a marketplace. He also loves cycling with his children along the trails of the Oak Ridges Moraine and skating on the Richmond Green skate trail. His mother prefers spending Thursday summer evenings listening to bands at the Mill Pond’s gazebo and nibbling on popcorn while catching up with old friends. As she says: “You still see those same faces. It’s like a reunion.”

Mayor Barrow was also born in Richmond Hill and raised his own family there. Though he sees many of his old high school friends around town, he’s thrilled that the sense of community is beckoning the younger generation. Rather than moving north or south, he says they’re choosing to raise a family in a place they know and love.

“Because you’re the mayor people come up and say, ‘Oh, Richmond Hill is a great place,’ ” he says. “That’s all flattery. But I do get people who say, ‘We looked all around and we’ve chosen Richmond Hill. It just has the atmosphere of a community, it has a small-town feel.’ ”

Mayor Barrow and council are currently involved in public consultation on a new civic space that rivals the land size of Nathan Phillips Square. The proposed Civic Precinct, will be bounded by Major Mackenzie Drive to the north, Church Street to the east, Hopkins Street to the south, and Arnold Crescent to the west. The goal is to create “a functional, community-focused people place.” A draft plan will be released to the public for comment sometime next year. This week, though, folks are excited about the opening of a new 56,000-sq.-ft. recreational facility. The Oak Ridges Community Centre on Bayview Avenue, with views of Lake Wilcox, will feature a six-lane leisure pool with slide, a fitness studio and a 7,000-sq.-ft. gymnasium.

Both are extensions of the town's People Plan project that has been seeking residents' input for the past few years to shape their home's future.

Mayor Barrow regularly treks down Highway 404 and the Don Valley Parkway to attend Toronto Maple Leafs games ("And I don't wear a bag on my head," he laughs) or go to the theatre ("We have a beautiful theatre here that's three or four years old but we'll never attract War Horse."). He also likes heading over to Unionville in nearby Markham and to Vaughan Mills shopping centre, adding that he and the mayors of Markham and Vaughan often share ideas.

Mr. Hebert, though, rarely goes south of Highway 7. But when he has to, he finds it convenient being so close to two highways.

"In Richmond Hill you're able to access downtown yet still be in the beautiful suburbs with beautiful green space," he says. "And you have access to cottage country. It's nice and central."

Street Smarts: High on highrises in Richmond Hill

Suzanne Wintrob, Special to National Post

More than one million people live in York Region, spanning 1,776 square kilometres, from Lake Simcoe in the north to Steeles Avenue in the south. As the area's nine municipalities continue to grow, developers have followed. According to RealNet Canada, there were 64 high-rise project sites actively marketing in York Region in March, up from 44 a year ago. Fifteen high-rises opened in 2010, 26 in 2011, and six in the first three months of 2012.

With the Town of Richmond Hill running out of available land, Mayor Dave Barrow says the municipality's future growth is "up rather than sprawl." Residents are intensely involved in the Town's strategic and official plans and, no doubt, will have their say on residential construction.

"I find it very interesting and gratifying that when an application comes that doesn't seem to comply with the official plan, residents will stand up at a meeting and say, 'This is not what we envisioned for our town. It hasn't followed our plan,' " says Mayor Barrow. "It has become a document that is owned by the residents, and that's a great feeling to have as a resident but also as a mayor. It's a plan that takes us from a suburban community to a more urban community. We're going to have tall buildings and everything!"

Here's a sampling of condominium developments set to rise:

The Beverly Hills

Four towers (11, 11, 20 and 24 storeys) Builder Great Lands Location Yonge and 16th Suite Availability One-bedroom through two-bedroom-plus-den starting at \$258,000, Phase 1 more than 85% sold out, Phase 2 just released Hot Tickets More than 20,000 sq. ft. of amenities inspired by Caribbean resorts including an indoor/outdoor pool, licensed lounge, five-star dining and high-end boutiques on ground level; Phase 2's south towers have large cascading terraces Status Actively selling Occupancy June 2016 Contact 905-882-6636; thebeverlyhills.ca

The Fountains at Thornhill City Centre

Three towers (four, 16 and 18 storeys) on a 25-acre site Builder Liberty Development Location Bathurst and Centre Suite Availability 580 to 1,025 sq. ft., priced from \$272,000 to \$421,000 Hot Tickets Community of nine condominiums buildings and 61 townhomes centred around an internal courtyard Status First building under construction and open to the public Occupancy First building September 2013, second building January 2014, third building April 2014 Contact 905-731-8302; thefountaincondos.com

Minto WaterGarden

Six storeys, 218 units Builder Minto Location Yonge and Arnold Suite Availability From 552 to 1,820 sq. ft., priced from \$253,900 to \$963,900 Hot Tickets Harmonizes beautifully with the mature residential neighbourhood and lush green surroundings Status Actively selling Occupancy June 2014 Contact 416-915-3800; mintowatergarden.com

Miracle at Yonge Condominiums

Two midrise buildings comprising 289 units Builder Pemberton Group Location Yonge and Hwy 7 Suite Availability more than 90% sold. From 625 to 960 sq. ft., priced from the \$270,000s Hot Tickets Easy access to Highways 404 and 407, GO Train to Union Station, and York Region Transit and GO bus service; buildings share elegant lobby Status Under construction Occupancy August 2012 Contact 905-709-5700; pembertongroup.com

Royal Gardens

Three condominium towers in townhome community Builder Liberty Development Location Bayview and Hwy 7 Suite availability 515 to 1,190 sq. ft., priced from \$229,000 to \$530,000 Hot Tickets Green roofs, retail stores at ground level Status Under construction Occupancy West Tower July 2013,

The Crown and The Palace December 2013, Towns May 2013 Contact 905-889-9997; royalgardenscondos.ca

SkyCity Condominiums

Two buildings, the first with 20 storeys and 210 suites Builder Pemberton Group Location Yonge and Hwy 7 Suite Availability 640 to 1,035 sq. ft., priced from mid-\$300,000s Hot Tickets Shared three-storey podium houses lobby and amenities; master-planned community Status Registration Occupancy Spring 2015 Contact 905-709-5700; skycitycondos.com

Tao

Seven storeys, 170 units Builder Signature Communities Location Bayview and Hwy 407 500 to 1,800 sq. ft. priced from high \$200,000s to \$1-million, launches on May 26 Hot Tickets Backs onto ravine with walking path designed under the guidance of Feng Shui master Paul Ng to ensure all elements are in harmony Status Registration Occupancy February 2015 Contact 905-597-2535; taocondos.ca

World on Yonge

Four residential towers (18, 27, 31 and 31 storeys) Builder Liberty Development Location Yonge and Meadowview Suite Availability 530 to 1,250 sq. ft., priced from \$268,000 to \$665,000 Hot Tickets New park borders Meadowview Avenue; landscaped courtyard sits at focal point of this mixed-use community Status Under construction Occupancy 2015 for final phase Contact 905-771-7010; worldonyonge.ca

Xpression

Two 15-storey towers (North and South), 452 units Builder Zancor Homes Location Yonge and Observatory Suite Availability 352 to 1,174 sq. ft. Hot Ticket Six-floor podium Status Registration Occupancy Fall 2015 Contact 905-237-7810; xpressioncondos.com