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Street Smarts: Vaughan's great growth



ExpoCity is an ambitious master-planned community.

Kim Graham & Associates

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 16th part of a lengthy series examining the GTA's new condo 'hoods.

Walking through the doors of the North Thornhill Community Centre, the first thing that stimulates the senses is the enormous swimming pool. A glass wall

separates visitors from the bright and airy aquatic space, and on a sunny day the windows surrounding the pool cast a brilliant blue glow into the wide foyer. Laughter emanates from a nearby sitting area filled with tots and nannies, while through another glass wall adults lift weights, while chatting to each other.

Maurizio Bevilacqua has worked hard to garner this kind of reaction. The 26-year Vaughan resident calls it “senses-based planning” and it has been his passion as mayor of the 298,000-strong 905 city. He pushes the premise on planners, developers and residents to think beyond density and intensification and try to focus more wholeheartedly on creating experiences. Think of Manhattan’s active Times Square or the Bernini statues in Rome, he says. The sights, sounds and smells move you, and that’s what he wants to infuse throughout his fast-growing municipality.

“When you walk into that area, what does it feel like?” asks Italian-born Mayor Bevilacqua, who served as Vaughan’s Member of Parliament for 22 years before heading up the city in October 2010. “What does it truly feel like from my human experience point of view? [Senses-based planning] has not been done in other cities. What I’m trying to promote is that the senses need to be engaged, and then you begin to build a very vibrant city.”

Like the North Thornhill Community Centre Vaughan’s newest recreational entry, which opened its door in June 2010 — there are many favourite places that delight the mayor’s senses. There’s the vast, environmentally protected Boyd Conservation Area and its Pierre and Janet Berton Trail dedicated to the late author and resident, who picnicked there with his children. There’s the McMichael art gallery, focusing on Canadian art, and the small-town feeling evoked by strolling through the quaint villages of Kleinburg and Woodbridge. There’s the multicultural crowds and human interaction of Canada’s Wonderland amusement park and Vaughan Mills shopping centre, the latter attracting 14 million visitors annually.

And there are the modern structures such as Vaughan City Hall “where you feel a sense of modernity and avant-garde thinking” with its expanses of glass and openness that Mayor Bevilacqua says “speaks to the spirit of the city.” In his opinion, it’s much more more important to build for the human spirit than to simply think in terms of upping the number of residential development and industrial parks.

“That’s how greatness is achieved,” he says.

Indeed, Vaughan is working hard to keep pace with its incredible growth. The population grew by 80% between 1996 and 2006 and is projected to reach more than 400,000 by 2031. Forty-five per cent of the population are

immigrants, with 72 languages spoken at home, in school and at work. Everything is built with residents in mind, from the Sports Village, with its four NHL-sized ice rinks and 30,000-square-foot outdoor sports park, to the 10 community centres and parks offering tennis, soccer and bocce. There's also a new hospital set to open in 2015. In recent years, subdivisions have been built with homes facing main thoroughfares (rather than sidewalks abutting onto wooden-fenced backyards) for an open community feel.

With \$2.6-billion invested in public transit infrastructure by three levels of government and York Region, the excitement is mounting. By late 2015, the Spadina subway will extend from Downsview Station to the new Vaughan Metropolitan Centre (VMC), set to become the municipality's new downtown hub with offices, condos, eateries, shops, hotels and cultural facilities centred along Highway 7 between Jane Street and Highway 400. There will be six stops in total along the 8.5-km route, all connecting to other regional transit services such as Go Transit.

Given the number of people attracted to the 905, another \$1.4-billion was committed by the province in 2009 for vivaNext "rapidways" to be built across York Region. As part of the vivaNext rapid transit plan, Highway 7 is being reworked to become a rapidway with 14 new Viva bus stations and wider sidewalks, planters and street furniture. Construction is already underway in Markham, Richmond Hill and Newmarket, with work in Vaughan set to begin this fall.

"Congestion has been the number one issue in York Region for some years," says vivaNext spokesperson Dale Albers. "These rapid transit projects will provide frequent, fast transit for residents and those who work in York Region. Rapid transit will connect existing and emerging new downtowns throughout York Region that will be great new destinations to live, work, and play, with welcoming boulevards and open spaces."

Peter Bonura is thrilled the subway will soon make it into the 905. The 25-year-old financial advisor grew up in Thornhill and has just purchased a new condo at ExpoCity, a five-tower development on 300 hectares of land near the VMC site. Mr. Bonura says having a subway stop at his new doorstep will be convenient, especially because he'll be mobile no matter where his next job happens to be.

"Being in a suburb just above Toronto is perfect," says Mr. Bonura, who plays soccer with friends in a local park on weekends and then chills with them at Windy O'Neill's Irish Pub or Wendel Clark's sports lounge.

“It’s not too far. There’s quietness and peacefulness in terms of nice parks and open areas. And if I see my career going towards downtown’s corporate world, I’ll be close to the subway line.”

Right now, Mr. Bonura only ventures south of Bloor Street about twice a month with friends, a trip they don’t feel the need to make more often because there’s so much variety in Vaughan when it comes to entertainment and nightlife.

“It’s great to be close to friends, family and open space, and still be able to go downtown,” he says. “Vaughan is a great big city. There’s lots of things to do here.”

Street Smarts: We’ve got plans for Vaughan — the condos!

Vaughan has big plans — and that has the city’s Design Review Panel on its toes. The voluntary advisory board, made up of design experts, works with the city on proposed high-density developments in Vaughan and is assisting in the rollout of the much-hyped Vaughan Metropolitan Centre. Vaughan is the first municipality in York Region to establish such a panel.

“The Design Review Panel will provide a valuable voice to Council and City staff within the development approvals process to ensure we maintain high design standards for buildings in which our residents will live and work,” said Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua when the two-year pilot project was announced late last year.

Bellaria Residences

Tower Four is 16 storeys, 220 luxury units **Builder** Solmar Development **Location** Jane and Rutherford **Suite Availability** From 744 to 2,188 sq. ft., priced from \$319,900 to \$1.2- million **Hot Tickets** Four towers nestled in a mature 20-acre nature reserve, two-storey lobby **Status** Tower 3 occupied, Tower 4 under construction **Occupancy** October 2013 **Contact** 905-417-8482; solmar.ca

Expo City II

37 storeys, 351 units **Builder** Cortel Group **Location** Jane and Hwy 7 **Suite Availability** 676 to 2,191 sq. ft., priced from mid- \$200,000s to high \$500,000s **Hot Tickets** Part of five-tower development that will transform 300 hectares of commercial and industrial space into a metropolitan hub; in heart of the Vaughan Metropolitan Centre **Status** Actively selling **Occupancy** Fall 2015 **Contact** 905-597-7877; expocity.ca