

The Hot New City Centre

Don't miss out on buying into Condoville-- this prime spot is smokin' Suzanne Wintrob, National Post Published: Saturday, September 06, 2008

When Mel Lastman has a job to do, nooo-body can stop him.

"Everybody said it couldn't be done," says the former Toronto mayor and patriarch of the Bad Boy furniture chain of his uphill battle to create a vibrant city centre north of Highway 401. "Everyone said it was impossible, even the developers. But I went out and started to sell it. I did the opening and the ground-breaking. I said, 'This is the future of Toronto.' "

Back in the 1980s, as mayor of North York, Mr. Lastman made it his business to convince the masses that the area around Yonge Street and Sheppard Avenue had metropolitan appeal. The top-notch salesman championed redevelopment along the Yonge Street corridor and worked tirelessly to sell his vision to naysayers. His perseverance paid off big time, with construction crews moving in to build the North York Civic Centre, which combines a large public library and a busy public square named for Mayor Mel. A flurry of office towers, stores, restaurants and movie theatres followed, as did a new subway stop to cater to those stopping by or settling in.

While Mr. Lastman went on to become mayor of Toronto and moved to an office way downtown, he remained committed to North York by supporting condominium development and construction of the Sheppard subway line. And now, thanks to his efforts, this area has become a sought-after destination for young couples and real estate developers looking for a piece of the action.

"Thirty years ago when they were first starting to develop on Yonge Street, it was really just a commercial strip," says Mimi Ng, vice-president of marketing at Menkes Developments, "but a lot [of the recent development] ties into Mel Lastman's vision at the time of creating a true city centre -- a mixed-use district where people can work, shop, live and play. Menkes has really believed in that and bought into that vision."

Menkes is among a slew of developers getting busy north of the highway. Having built the Empress Walk retail and residential complex, the company is now working on Phase 3 of Savvy, a 20-storey, 260-unit building plus 20 townhouses at Yonge and Sheppard, and the two-tower, 400-suite Luxe at Yonge and Finch. Occupancy isn't for a while yet, but that hasn't stopped the masses from putting down their cash early. Luxe buyers won't get possession of their condos until late 2009, yet 90% of the units are sold. The same holds true down the road at Tridel's Grand Triomphe 2 (occupancy is early 2010, yet only six of 307 suites are left); Tridel's Avonshire (434 units, 80% sold, occupancy mid-2010); the Conservatory Group's Pearl (351 units, 85% sold, move in 2010), and others.

For those not willing to wait, the area that locals dub Condoville (the group of condos south of Sheppard, north of Highway 401, east of Yonge) are slightly older but in move-in condition. The high-rises boast pools, bowling alleys and rooftop patios, with condos fetching anywhere from \$200,000 for a 490-sq.-ft., one-bedroom to \$1-million plus for a luxury 3,000-sq.-ft., three-bedroom suite with several balconies. Each building "has its own niche, with maintenance fees affecting value dramatically," says Jeff Oulahen of Re/Max Realtron Realty.

The original houses east and west of Yonge Street are being snapped up quickly, mostly

by developers who know their market. According to Mr. Oulahen, they're splitting 60-and 70-ft. lots in half to get twice as much bang for the buck. Smaller developers are willing to pay more than \$600,000 for land value alone, replacing an original post-war home with 3,000-to 4,000-sq.-ft. modern houses that sell for around \$1.5-million. Prices are highest north of Sheppard and east of Yonge but drop off north of Finch.

"A lot of people are giving up the suburban life and taking up less space in a primer location," says Mr. Oulahen, a third-generation North Yorker who sells the area together with his parents and brother. "They're tired of taking the GO train."

James Coleman and Wendy Fernandez fit the profile perfectly. Married in May, they're both in their 30s. He works downtown at Ontario Power Generation and she is a teacher in Ajax. Instead of moving to his downtown condo, they recently followed their friends and relatives to Yonge and Sheppard and bought a six-year-old, 2,100-sq.-ft., three-bedroom townhouse. He takes the subway to work and she takes the highway. They rarely go downtown because, as Ms. Fernandez puts it, they can have just about everything nearby, including chain restaurants.

"I love it here more than I did out in the suburbs because there's so much to do," she says. "We can walk everywhere. We can hop on the subway. We can ride our bikes wherever we want to go. And we don't have to rely on our car."

That doesn't surprise Paul Oulahen, Jeff's father. He has lived in the area all his life and now owns a building at Yonge and Sheppard that houses the family's real estate business. What strikes him is how "way more urban" the neighbourhood has become since he was a kid.

"Before, you had rows and rows of streets with single-family homes and no buildings taller than three or four storeys," he recalls. "I keep telling Jeff to give Yonge and Sheppard 20 years and I bet it will be somewhere between Yonge and Eglinton and Yonge and Bloor in terms of the quality of shops and retail."

One of the latest developments in the works belongs to Tridel and Hullmark Developments. Set for the corner of Yonge and Sheppard where Dominion and National Sport stand today, the one-million-sq.-ft. Hullmark Centre will include what Hullmark president Jeff Hull describes as "Class A office space, office condominiums where doctors and dentists could be, retail space including a high-end grocer, as well as 650 condominiums" in what Tridel is billing as "the two tallest condominium towers to grace the North York skyline" (one at 50 storeys, the other at 35). They're targeting young professionals who want access to public transit and the highway, as well as empty nesters and the growing Korean and Persian communities. Project details will be unveiled later this fall.

Hullmark Centre was conceived by Jeff's grandfather, Murphy Hull, a Polish immigrant and humble plasterer who eventually formed Hullmark Developments and partnered with Tridel on numerous commercial and residential projects over the past 30 years. This was supposed to be the elder Hull's "legacy project," says Jeff Hull, but he died a few months ago and never got to see his dream come to fruition. Mr. Hull proudly carries the torch and is keyed up by what's to come.

"The excitement that you have in building this new city centre where there wasn't one before -- I think a lot of people want to be a part of that," he says.

Mayor Mel would certainly be proud.