

Imaginative Central Park vision viewed favourably

Creative use of density key to making vision work

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EMC News - In a city where nary a week goes by without a new infill project attracting the scorn of a community, the reaction to an ambitious development proposed for Central Park comes as a bit of a surprise.

Ashcroft Homes' vision for the remaining undeveloped lands in its Central Park community consists of a serpentine 'main street' running parallel to Merivale Road, bordered by several mixed-use buildings - four of which will be 18 stories or higher, perched on top of broader podiums.

When Ashcroft presented its plans to the community in December, the overall response was one of guarded approval - something rarely seen in Ottawa, a municipality many accuse of having batophobia (fear of being near tall buildings).

Much of the reason for the reaction stems from the proposal's innovative and imaginative use of space and density; Ashcroft worked with renowned architect Richard Brisbin to create a vision of a walkable neighbourhood street (with on-street parking) that would shield the community from the unsightly four-lane Merivale Road artery while still respecting the site's zoned

density.

"As with any development, there were people on either side of the spectrum - some were opposed to it while others really like it," said Central Park Community Association president Liz Allan. "Most people were in-between. We'd like to see that site developed - it's just sitting there and isn't very attractive."

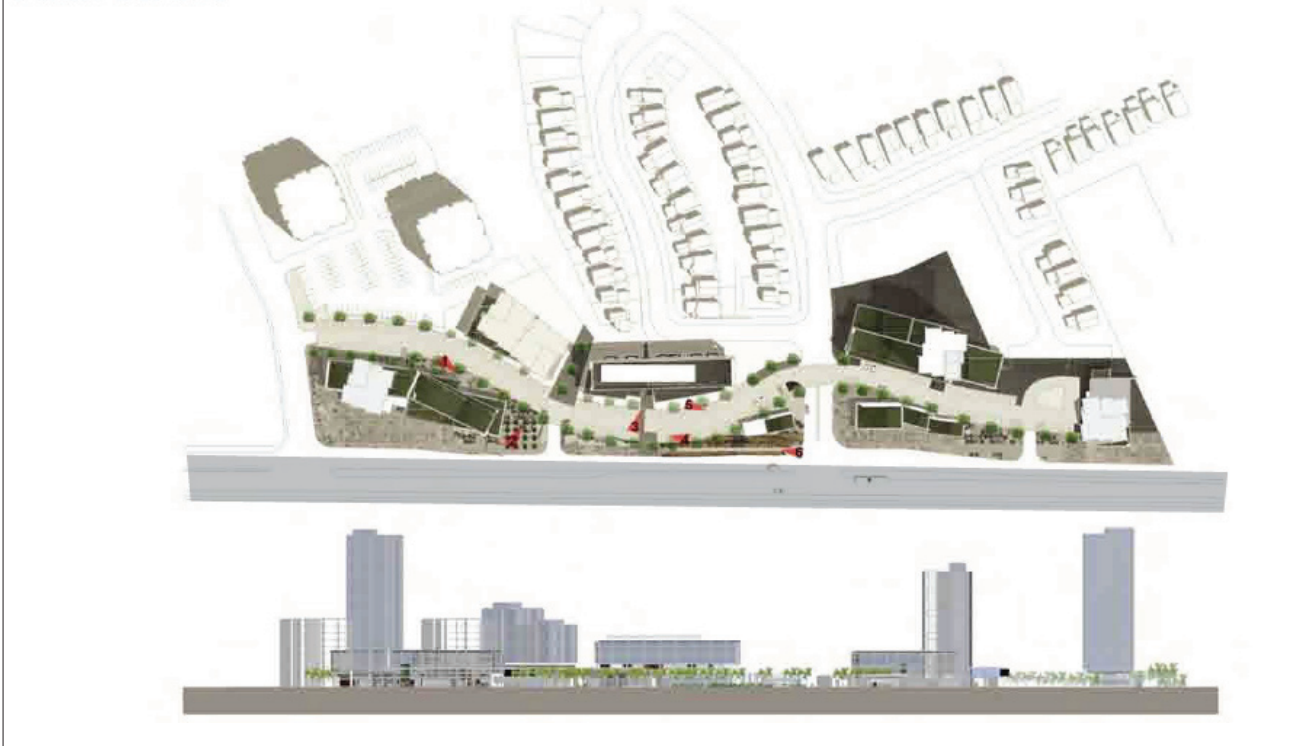
Allan said that many people who were initially hesitant to lend their approval to the proposal warmed up after discussing their concerns to her and the developer.

"It's quite innovative," said Allan. "At the end of the day it will be an interesting design, more so than what can be done with the existing zoning."

While the overall density of the site would remain the same, Ashcroft would have to file an application with the city to allow for greater building heights. The four slim residential towers would sit on two and five-storey podiums that would bookend the main street, with shorter mixed-use buildings built along the mid-way point of the heavily landscaped street.

Ashcroft president David Choo says the proposal would give residents of Central Park more of the urban lifestyle that

Traditional + Arterial
Main Street



These conceptual drawings show what the new 'main street' of the Central Park development would look like (top) and what the overall development would look like when viewed from the Experimental Farm (bottom).

many homeowners are gravitating to by having shops that people can walk to within the community.

"This road is designed to be pedestrian-friendly," said Choo, adding that it would not serve as a shortcut or major entry point to Merivale. "You're only (on this street) because

you want to be there."

Choo said it is "surprising and delightful" the community, for the most part, recognizes the advantages of the design. Higher density at select points along a street is more pleasing than a wall of similar-sized buildings, he said, something River ward Coun. Maria McRae agrees with.

"Ashcroft has permission to develop that piece of Merivale Road," she said. "The proposal on the books years ago was an impenetrable wall (of buildings) that would have separated the community from the Experimental Farm...It wouldn't be unique and wouldn't be interesting."

Coun. McRae said the developer did the right thing by going to the community first with its vision, rather than springing it on them as an after thought in advance of a re-zoning application. The proposal itself was hard not to like, she said, as it was designed by "one of

the best architects in the country."

Brisbin is the mastermind behind the design of the new downtown convention centre. Planning and design firm FoTenn Consultants was also brought on board to see the process through and ensure the developer made the best use of the property.

At Coun. McRae's insistence, the concept was brought before a design review panel.

As with any infill proposal, the concern of the designers and the surrounding community is how well the new development co-exists with its surroundings. Impacts such as shadowing are looked into, as well as whether the land being developed is sensitive from an ecological or historical perspective.

Shadowing on nearby houses was minimized due to the strategic placement of the tall buildings, while the latter concern didn't apply to this property.

"The site is a visual wasteland right now," said Coun. McRae. "Tumbleweeds blow through in the summer. What's there now is not doing anything to create a modern, cosmopolitan vision for a modern, cosmopolitan community."

The main concern the community had with the proposal was the possibility that the finished product might not match the detailed concept they were initially presented with. A 'bait and switch', as Allen called it.

Coun. McRae expressed this concern as well, which is why she ordered a holding designation placed on the zoning application file once it is submitted in the coming weeks, to alleviate community fears.

This means the final site plan cannot deviate from the concept presented to the com-

munity.

That said, Coun. McRae stressed she isn't about to prejudge that Ashcroft would do something wrong.

"It's frustrating when people want to pass judgment on a concept just because it's from a certain developer," she said.

Ashcroft is at the centre of the controversy surrounding the redevelopment of the former Soeurs de la Visitation convent in Westboro - a proposal that continues to be strongly opposed by the neighbouring community.

Choo said Ashcroft would have no reason to trick the community or potential buyers.

"There's no bait and switch - this is the vision," he said. "Why wouldn't we want this to be the outcome?"

Choo said the city and its residents are undergoing a change in what they expect from their city and its developers, and the Central Park community is proof of that. While the first buyers in the development in the late 1990s were in the market for single detached homes and townhomes, nowadays inner-city homebuyers demand more from their surrounding community.

"Projects evolve - 10 years ago I couldn't propose this (vision) even though the zoning was in place," said Choo. "Now, there's a demand for mixed-use developments. The most a developer can do is satisfy that demand in a creative way."

He added, "I think the city has tipped into urban living - it's a phenomenon that you can't predict, but you can observe. Buyer's aren't buying condos because the city says it should intensify, they're buying them because they want to live there."



The site as it appears now: With the exception of a Tim Horton's and a sales centre, little else is happening on the property fronting on Merivale Road.



This artists' concept, which was presented to the Central Park community in December, shows the type of public space that would be included in the proposed development on Merivale Road.