

11 Apr 2009

Edmonton Journal

JANE CARDILLO EDMONTON

Heart of Edmonton thriving with condo owners

Downtown residents given credit for growing revitalization

Friends and family of Chris Buyze were incredulous when they heard he was planning to move into a condominium in downtown Edmonton.

BRIAN J. GAVRILOFF, THE JOURNAL

President of the Downtown Edmonton Community Chris Buyze takes the air in front of his condo at the Fifth Street Lofts.

“People thought I was crazy,” Buyze laughs. “They said you’re moving where? And you’re moving that close to the Greyhound (bus station)?”

Buyze, president of the Downtown Edmonton Community League, says the reaction was not totally unjustified when he took up residence 10 years ago in a loft in the historic warehouse district on 104th Street.

Back then, city centre was a lonely place to call home.

“There would have been about 6,000 people in the downtown boundaries,” Buyze recalls. “You could basically walk downtown on a Sunday and not run into another person.” My, how times have changed. The area that once held more parking lots than residential buildings is now a bustling metropolis, jam-packed with high-end clothing boutiques, gourmet restaurants, funky shops and lots of people.

“We probably now are around 12,000 to 13,000 (residents) and the spaces that are under construction right now will probably bring us up another 1,000,” says Jim Taylor, executive-director of the Downtown Business Association.

Those numbers only reflect residents of the official downtown core, a 14-block area from 111th Street to 97th Street and 97th Avenue to 105th Avenue, Taylor says. Many more live in close proximity to downtown in such areas as Oliver, Riverdale, Rosedale and Central McDougall.

“There’s been all this massive residential built right on the borders of downtown,” Taylor says. “When you build another couple of thousand units in Oliver (for example), those people flow through into the downtown.

“It becomes their natural gathering place, their place to shop, their place to go for supper, their place to go for entertainment.”

Ashley May moved into his condominium in Oliver last June.

“Edmonton is the biggest small town in the world because you have all of the amenities of living in a large city, but it still feels quite small,” May says.

“I’m a fairly urban person and the only way that I can have the Montreal urban lifestyle was to move downtown.”

May walks to work and meets friends for drinks or dinner at any number of nearby venues.

“I’m within walking distance of a multitude of locations. I don’t have to waste gas commuting and I get the side benefit of having walking in my day.”

Much of downtown’s population boom can be traced to a surge in residential construction that started about 10 years ago, says Taylor.

That's when the city offered incentives to revitalize the core.

"We designated 1,000 grants of \$4,500 each for every residential development that was built within the downtown borders," says Taylor, who was then a councillor in the downtown ward.

"We saw immediately renovations of redundant buildings and warehouses and some office buildings ... into residential buildings. We saw warehouse conversions to lofts, we saw highrise conversions to condos."

Even when the grants ran out, construction didn't stop.

"There are still new condos being approved at city council and built as we speak," says Taylor. See page 76

Towers on 104th respect historic requirements

From page H1 Among them is The Quest, a 22storey building planned for 104th Avenue and 105th Street.

Reza Mostashari, developer of the Icon towers on 104th Street, stands on a penthouse balcony. The towers are striking additions to the increasingly trendy street.

Another is The Icon, a project consisting of two chic skyscrapers, one 30 storeys, the other 35 floors. They are the tallest condominiums to grace the downtown core.

People are living in the first tower. The second is scheduled to open next winter.

Located on 104th Street, the Icon's ultra-modern glass towers sit on four-storey brick pedestals that complement the area's early 20th-century warehouses, now converted into tony condominiums.

"We had to adhere to a heritage zoning which require us to make the podium look old," says Reza Mostashari, president of Langham Properties, developer of the project.

"The next 26 storeys, which are the condos, are very modern. It's a big contrast within the structure, transitioning from the historic to the modern."

The pedestals will house luxury shops and businesses, including a high-end coffee shop, wine bar and hair salon, says Mostashari.

The project will bring more residents downtown.

"In each tower we have 280 units, so there's at least a few hundred if not 1,000 people living there," Mostashari says. "It adds a lot to the downtown ... More density, more activity."

Another project infusing life into the heart of the city is the Aurora by Urban Landmarks.

With about 1,200 units, it will consist of six towers and three low-rise buildings on land north of the former railyards.

The buildings will face a landscaped courtyard with a park and water feature.

The first building is the Mira, a 23storey glass, metal and brick tower, at 106th Avenue and 103rd Street. It's scheduled to open in 2011.

“There’s such a vibrant change to the downtown core,” says Gordon Reekie, a Remax realtor who is marketing the project for Urban Landmarks.

Vibrant is a word Craig Chupka would use to describe his neighbourhood.

“I work in the legislature, so the natural choice was for me to move downtown,” says Chupka, who lives in a condo at 104th Street and 98th Avenue.

He is close to the popular Sobey’s Urban Fresh grocery store and a stone’s throw from restaurants and retail.

“Starbucks is just up the street ... It’s close to Chinatown, nothing’s far away.”

Taylor believes cities are remembered for their downtowns.

“Your downtown becomes your signature and the place you recognize when you talk about a major city.”

And the heart of Edmonton is thriving, thanks to the people who call it home.

“We knew residential was going to be the driver for the revitalization of downtown,” says Taylor. “All the residential buildings, 95 per cent of them, have been condos. So somebody’s living in them and you have a much more permanent and committed resident.”

Printed and distributed by NewspaperDirect | www.newspaperdirect.com, US/Can: 1.877.980.4040, Intern: 800.6364.6364 | Copyright and protected by applicable law.