

Victoria Park community has 'risen from the ashes'

Big development plans help revive neighbourhood

MARIO TONEGUZZI
CALGARY HERALD

Calgary developer John Torode remembers a meeting a few years back when the old Victoria Park School site came up for sale in a run-down neighbourhood that had been overtaken by prostitutes and drug dealers.

But despite the location, Torode saw potential and opportunity when he bought the site six years ago.

"I said this is a really good opportunity to get a full city block," says Torode, president of Torode Realty Advisors Ltd. "People were looking at this area still thinking it's kind of sketchy — which it was. We thought the Stampede is expanding to 12th Avenue so they're going to get rid of all the old houses in that area and gradually these houses will disappear and the area would start with a clean blackboard. And that's really what's happened."

"We had to do something of scale here to combat the hookers and crack houses and stuff like that. That's what got us started. And then I said if we're going to do this big project here, which is a major project, we're going to improve the neighbourhood because of that and we should buy up other land here so we get the benefit of that."

Today, Torode's first Arriva residential condo tower rises 34 storeys on the corner of 12th Avenue and Olympic Way S.E. Another highrise tower is under construction on the block and a third could follow. The three towers will include almost 600 residential units.

As pieces of land came up for sale in Victoria Park, Torode started buying them — always looking to the future and to the possibilities this formerly urban wasteland had to offer down the road.

"I'd seen a couple of projects in the U.S. that had gone and redeveloped around entertainment venues and it had never really been looked at around the Stampede/Saddledome," he says. "I thought it was the kind of thing where you get urbanization around these entertainment venues... this area made sense. People would enjoy it and with the closeness to downtown you could walk to work, you could walk to the game and you can walk to restaurants. That's where I see it going."

Mayor Dave Bronconnier says there are many mixed-use developments now going on in the old Victoria Park neighbourhood which is causing a dramatic change there.

"I guess it's like the phoenix. They've risen from the ashes of days gone by of communities that have degenerated over time and now they're coming back to life in a very new and inspiring way. That's what you see. We're starting to see it. It's taken a long time," says Bronconnier.

"You start to put it together and it's not too many years into the future where you've got a reinvigorated and a new themed Stampede Park which is a year-round destination, better transportation linkages tied in to hotel development, entertainment districts as well as residential enclaves sprinkled north of Stampede Park. And now you have a community that's got a lot of cache. And look at where you are location wise. You're right in the downtown. You're virtually downtown."

The amount of commercial and residential development in the vicinity of Stampede Park is staggering. Within just a few blocks, residential and office towers are already springing up from the landscape.

Statistics by Michelle Pink, research analyst for commercial real estate firm Barclay Street Real Estate Ltd., show almost 400,000 square feet of retail development, more than 440,000 square feet of office space and 885 residential condominium units are under construction near Stampede Park.

Several other projects have been approved totalling 5,800 square feet of retail, 314,000 square feet of office space and 958 residential condo units.

And Pink's research indicates the proposed development down the road could see as many as more than 6,200 residential condo units, 349,000 square feet of office space and 36,000 square feet of retail development.

Thom Mahler, Coordinator, Centre City Planning & Design Policy for the City of Calgary, says a few years ago people in the Victoria Park community began looking at revitalization of the neighbourhood.

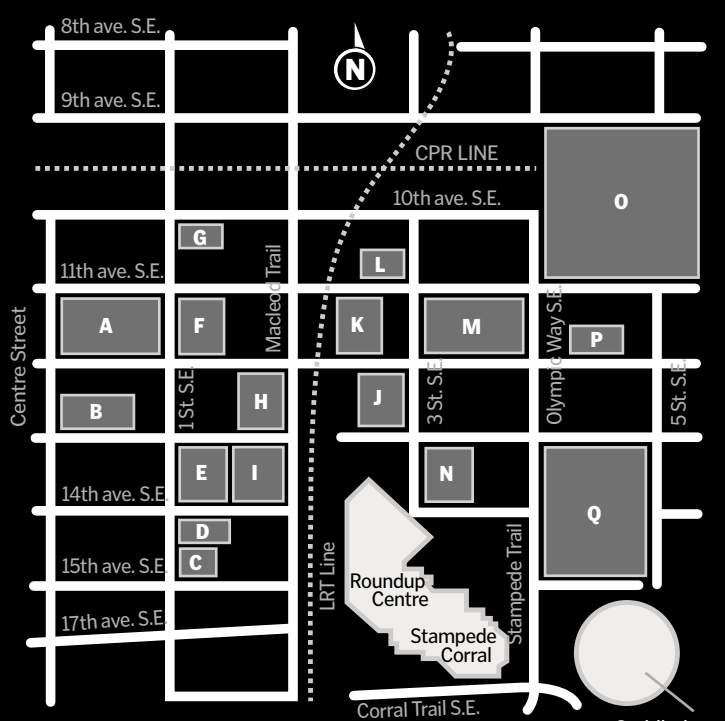
"That sent a signal to the development interests that they were interested now in seeing redevelopment," says Mahler. "The market conditions still had to be right for those larger projects to come on stream. . . . It took a visionary developer like a John Torode to present a bigger picture of what was possible in that area. It was pretty risky at the time. I remember when he first came forward people were excited, but we



Photos, Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald

Louis Lovasz tends to his garden on 11th Avenue S.E., one of the last stretches of homes left in Victoria Park. Lovasz says he's not ready to leave the area yet despite encroaching developments, like the Arriva condo tower behind or the expansion of the Calgary Stampede.

Victoria Park Area Development Plan



LEGEND

- A Giffels-Exchange (residential/commercial)
- B Kahanoff Centre (commercial)
- C Vetro (residential, completed)
- D Sasso (residential, completed)
- E Nuero (residential)
- F Keynote (residential/commercial)
- G Sky Tower (residential/commercial)
- H Curtis Block (residential/commercial)
- I Stampede Station (commercial)
- J Stampede Casino (commercial)
- K West Arriva (commercial/residential)
- L Ribtor II (complete)
- M Arriva (residential, complete)
- N Roundup Centre Expansion (commercial)
- O Remington Railway (residential/com.)
- P Viva (residential)
- Q Stampede Trail (commercial)

Source: Barclay Street Real Estate Ltd.



A solitary house remains in the former Victoria Park neighbourhood adjacent to the Stampede Grounds developments.

weren't used to seeing that scale of development and that much residential in that area."

Torode has the bulk of development plans right now in the old Victoria Park area. They include:

■ Arriva — three residential condo towers of 34, 44 and 44 storeys. The first one is finished, the second tower will be finished in two years and the third tower will depend on the current market with construction to begin possibly in a year's time;

■ Viva — Two residential condo towers (19 and 16 storeys) totalling almost 300 units with the first tower to begin construction possibly by this fall with completion in the spring of 2010. The second tower timeline will depend on the market;

■ West Arriva — A development permit application is with the city for a hotel of about 160 suites and a condo building of about 90 units;

■ Curtis Block — A proposal for two condo towers totalling about 440 units and an office building of about 150,000 square feet;

■ Ramsay Exchange — A billion-dollar 8.49-hectare mixed-use development comprising 650,000 square feet of office space, up to 250,000 square feet of retail and 2,000 residential units on Spiller Road S.E., just above Stampede Park.

Two other major developments in the vicinity of Stampede Park include Keynote and Stampede Station.

The Keynote development will have a 14-storey office tower and two residential towers of 26 and 34 storeys. All towers will be connected by an internal Plus 15 and roof garden system. The office tower will include the Sunterra Market.

The complex will include 230,000 square feet of office space, 40,000 square feet of retail space and 429 resi-

dential units.

Guy Scott, president of WAM Development Group involved with Opus Building Corp. in the development of the mixed-use Stampede Station project across the street from Stampede Park on Macleod Trail, says when discussions began with the city in the fall of 2000 on that site "there was a big blank piece of property in the middle of a very high-traffic area."

"And there was a beginning of a re-urbanization of downtown North America. People were moving downtown, residential things were coming back from suburbia," says Scott. "We thought there was an opportunity for a mixed-use project there that really wasn't anything happening in Calgary much like that at the time. The C-train station was right there."

The Stampede Station project includes four residential condo towers totalling just over 1,000 units. Sasso has been completed. Vetro will soon be completed. There will be retail in the main level of the two towers consisting of a large bank and a large drugstore and other personal services.

Two residential towers called Nuera will take another two years of construction and negotiations are currently underway for a large urban grocery store for the retail space on the main level.

Scott says the two office buildings will have a total of 480,000 square feet with the first building of nine storeys to be completed by the end of this year and a second building of 18 storeys to be completed by 2011.

Also on the site is land owned by a hotel development company "and we're hopeful that they've got something to announce prior to the fall," says Scott.

Remington Development Corp. also has designs on a huge mixed-use development called Railtown in Victoria Park along 11th Avenue S.E., east of

4th Street.

And as you head west of Macleod Trail and the Stampede, numerous residential and commercial developments are springing up or have sprung up from the ground in the Beltline area.

David Low, executive director of the Victoria Crossing BRZ, says "Railtown is an area with just unbelievable potential just sort of waiting to happen. There have been a number of notions floated around. I think just looking at the size of the land and the context in which it's situated it would not be unreasonable to expect a very large multi-tower, office, residential complex going in there."

"With the densification of east Victoria and then with the addition of Railtown and we're just starting to see some things come into place with the Stampede expansion and the Arriva projects, Railtown will kind of be the final frontier for us in a way."

Bronconnier says he's seen initial very preliminary drafts for Railtown. It's important to realize that location will house the future southeast LRT running along between 9th and 10th Avenues as well as the future high-speed rail link between Calgary and Edmonton and maybe Fort McMurray.

Bruce Graham, president and CEO of Calgary Economic Development, says development in the Beltline area, which encompasses the east Victoria Park area near the Stampede, "quite frankly it's probably every bit as exciting as what's happening in downtown Calgary."

Graham first came to Calgary about five years ago. What were his first impressions of the Victoria Park area, which is only a few blocks away from his CED office at the Telus Convention Centre building?

"My first reaction was one of opportunity. Certainly it was blighted. . . . I'm not taking anything away from those people that have had to make those risks and put their hard-earned cash into the ground. I realize that the train tracks are a barrier that psychologically had to be overcome just like the development east of Centre Street was a psychological barrier that needed to be overcome. From my personal perspective and not having that pre-conceived sense of those barriers being the railway tracks and Centre Street, I just saw potential. . . . I'm not surprised at all. I think the only surprise, and I think it's been driven by our economic marketplace, is just how quickly it's all come together. It's almost like as soon as somebody pulled the trigger the others started to see the opportunity."

FROM A DEAL: 'It's all in the name of progress'

Watt grew up in Victoria Park, moved to Vancouver and has lived in the home for the last seven years. "My papa was a millwright by trade and he was in construction all his life as a journeyman welder. He helped build this city up quite a bit, as well as the rest of Alberta, and he always used to say, 'It's all in the name of progress.' So this is exactly how I feel."

Watt said the neighbourhood never stopped changing over the years.

"This area has changed over. It has changed in all the years I have been here and my folks have been here because it's always been home base. It's always been constantly changing through the years. If you went to the Glenbow Museum, you'll see that 11th Avenue here used to be a cattle drive many years ago. . . . The houses haven't changed other than the ones that have went down. These are just little war houses."

And most of them were built at the turn of the century — 20th century, that is.

Louis Lovasz, 68, also has a home for sale on 11th Avenue S.E., with a list price of \$350 per square foot — or a cool \$1.7 million. He has lived there since 1977, when he bought it for \$55,000.

"There's only six houses left on the block. So eventually we've got to go," he said.

"The neighbourhood was really bad with all those prostitutes and everything around. It was really bad. You can't leave nothing outside because they were stealing it. Now you don't see any bums around."

Asked what his old neighbourhood will look like when all the new development is completed, Lovasz said: "I'm pretty sure you can't even recognize this area."

There are actually six properties for sale along the strip — one of the homes does not have a For Sale sign outside, said Amanda Priolo, a realtor with Re/Max Real Estate Central, who is selling the properties with colleague Dino DiDiodoro.

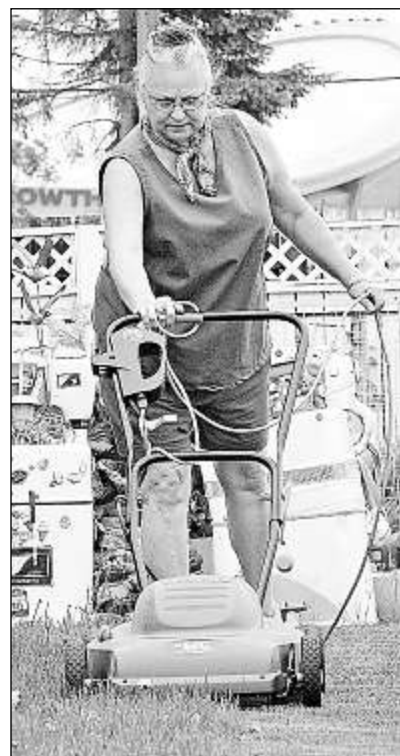
"The prices are based on a square footage basis, so depending on how many square feet the lot is and then they're listed at \$350 a square foot," she said. The biggest lot is almost 7,000 square feet.

All are separate owners. "And they all actually live there. They're not even rentals. They're pretty much the last six individual homeowners that live in their houses in Vic Park," said Priolo.

"Ideally, we'd like to sell them as a parcel. . . . Ideally, somebody would build a high-end highrise condo there. So, they'd like to sell them all as a group to a developer because that's eventually where it's going to go, but if somebody did want to purchase them individually, we can't stop somebody from offering or them from selling them. But they're priced as a parcel, for sure."

"What's happened down there over the years is — and what these people want to avoid — developers, these bigwigs in Calgary, who have come in and purchased all these lots individually for next to nothing and kind of picked these owners off one by one and then built these massive highrises on them. And the money they're making on them is just ridiculous. I mean, they're not paying what they should be for the land. So these guys are basically the last six down there and they're saying they don't want the same fate as all their neighbours got and so they want to sell it as a parcel for what the land should be worth."

MTONEGUZZI@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM



Ted Rhodes, Calgary Herald
Victoria Park resident Darlene Watt is ready to sell the house her family owned for 60 years. The area is ripe for major development.

MTONEGUZZI@THEHERALD.CANWEST.COM