

Vaughan set to begin 'new era' for downtown

Suburbs look to urbanize cores with dense hubs

BY MEGAN O'TOOLE

In what Mayor Maurizio Bevilacqua is deeming "the beginning of a new era," Vaughan developers will take the first step Wednesday toward building the city's much-anticipated downtown hub.

Years ago, like many of Greater Toronto's suburban municipalities, Vaughan embarked on a mission to urbanize its core by transforming a car-centric, 300-hectare swath of land around Highway 7 and Jane Street into a walkable downtown, complete with businesses, residences, cultural facilities and pedestrian shopping areas.

The first piece to begin falling into place is Expo City, a five-tower residential development complete with an urban square and retail gallery. A formal ribbon-cutting ceremony for the first tower is slated for Wednesday even-

ing, with construction to start in the coming weeks.

The development, expected to accommodate about 4,000 residents, will be steps from the new Vaughan Metropolitan Centre subway stop, part of the TTC's Toronto-York Spadina extension that is slated to be in service by 2015.

"This avant-garde project marks the beginning of a new era in our city's history," Mr. Bevilacqua said. "It will set the standard for future development in the downtown core and will embody the essence of Vaughan's transformation from a suburban municipality to a world-class city."

Targeted for completion by 2017, the Expo City development will fall "in the same tradition as some of the greatest cities in the world" by promoting opportunities for people to gather and interact, said Mario Cortelucci, president of developer Cortel Group. Among those spaces will be a central park, complete with recreational trails and protected wildlife areas.



CITY OF VAUGHAN

A rendering of Vaughan's proposed downtown development, including the soon-to-be-opened Expo City towers.

Indeed, the shift toward more pedestrian-friendly streets has become front-and-centre for many greater Toronto suburbs. The massive Downtown Markham development is aiming to transform a swath of land between the Rouge River Valley and Highway 407 into a mixed-use urban downtown, complete with European-style promenades and a central piazza. In Mississauga, the Downtown21 strategy will change the fundamental structure of the city's downtown, constructing a dense new network of easy-to-walk

blocks complete with restaurants, cafes, night life and a fully integrated light-rail transit system.

Similarly, in Vaughan's new Metropolitan Centre, developments such as Expo City will intersperse public gathering spots with intensified residential and retail development — welcome relief for a city battling some of the region's worst gridlock.

"It's going to become a people's place, a place where people will live, work and play in the same area," Mr. Bevilacqua said. "It's part of a shift toward intensification,

which will bring benefits to our quality of life [and] transportation.... It is extremely vital to the future of the city."

Andrew Brethour, whose firm is handling sales and marketing for Expo City, said the project was designed to be "very Yorkville-like."

"What was sort of a classic suburban community will now have an urban core and a connectivity that will take it directly to downtown Toronto," Mr. Brethour said.

Ryerson University professor Myer Siemiatycki said many suburban municipalities have started to realize

that in order to attract business and investment, they cannot maintain the "one-dimensional" model of the traditional, sprawling suburb.

"Suburban subdivisions and malls alone do not make a thriving urban centre," Mr. Siemiatycki said. "There does need to be more of a dynamism and vitality in the mix.... I think there really is a recognition that without something resembling the feel of downtown, you're not a real city."

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