

Beltline charts own rebirth

Community won't wait for city hall

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Calgary Herald

Thursday, May 15, 2003

Residents and businesses of Calgary's Beltline are taking charge of their neighbourhoods' destinies, with a plan they are confident will turn neglected inner-city property into the city's first truly urban enclave.

Tired of waiting for city hall to redevelop the communities immediately south of downtown, community leaders have created a vision of what the area should become, along with all the necessary steps to make it happen.

The Beltline Initiative, a 72-page plan that has been several years in the making, will be unveiled today, spelling out how Victoria Park and Connaught can become cutting-edge communities in the heart of the city.

"Everybody is of the frame of mind that Calgary is the best place to live. I am of the frame of mind that the Beltline is the best place to live in Calgary," said Rob Taylor, president of the Connaught Community Association, who led the initiative.

"This is an area that has grown spontaneously, often despite planning rather than because of it, but we decided we needed to come together to move our common goals forward."

Overlooked by efforts to revitalize the East Village, Eau Claire and the former General Hospital site in Bridgeland, many who live and work in the Beltline have been quietly toiling away to encourage residential and commercial development in what has long been known as some of the city's seediest sectors.

Their efforts have paid off with the attraction of numerous high-tech firms setting up shop in Victoria Park; bars, restaurants and boutiques flourishing along 1st Street S.W.; and a multitude of housing projects getting under way around the area.

While it has a good start, Taylor said a more aggressive approach is needed to regenerate the Beltline while ensuring the endemic problems of poverty, drugs and prostitution are adequately addressed.

"This isn't only about what government's going to do for us, it's about what we're going to do for ourselves," Taylor said.

To that end, the community associations and the three business revitalization zones in the vicinity -- Victoria Crossing, Uptown 17 and 4th Street -- hired a consultant and sat down to figure out how the entire Beltline can be made more attractive, safe and economically successful.



CREDIT: Jessica Gergely, Calgary Herald

The Beltline, which includes 17th Avenue, already boasts a colourful mix of shops and restaurants. Community leaders hope to act on a consultant's report designed to increase the appeal of the district. Among the challenges is reducing poverty and other social problems.

The resulting report entails a redevelopment plan unique to the area, and without the traditional "suburban bias" of the city's traditional planning policies.

"The dominance of the suburban style is now so great that generations of Calgarians have grown up without ever having experienced life in a truly urban neighbourhood," the report states.

"Yet the need to move away from suburban development models and increase population in our central city has never been greater. In Calgary, we must grow up, not just out."

Recommendations for making the Beltline more "livable" include:

- Set a 20-year population target of 40,000 for the Beltline, compared with the current population of 17,000;
- Improve pedestrian access to downtown;
- Upgrade parks, school sites, sidewalks and roadways to make them safer and more esthetically pleasing;
- Reduce poverty and other social problems with more affordable housing, stricter law enforcement and community-based crime prevention;
- Create "mixed-use" and high-density redevelopment of residential and commercial sites.

The plan addresses the wishes of businesses as well as residents of

the Beltline who are hoping to see major improvements in coming years, according to Eileen Stan, executive director of the Victoria Crossing BRZ.

"We felt we could accomplish more together than just biting off our own little piece and trying to deal with that," Stan said.

"One consolidated voice definitely has more power."

Stan said businesses and residential developers are particularly keen to see the city relax parking requirements for new projects in the area and for improvements to sidewalks and parks such as Central Memorial Park.

"We want this to be a place where people come to linger, not just pass through," Stan said.

Ald. Madeleine King, whose Ward 8 includes the entire Beltline area, said the initiative will ensure the community plays a strong role in shaping its redevelopment.

"By providing the framework, it means community residents and businesses are able to choose their own future, as opposed to reacting to what the city or developers might propose," King said.

"It's very significant because it's such a proactive approach to the challenges of inner-city densification."

History of the Beltline district (Connaught/West Victoria)

1893

- Connaught (Beltline) district is already a part of the city of Calgary.

1912

- The Beltline district extends south to 17th Avenue and west to 14th Street, and includes two- and three-storey homes, wide streets, treed boulevards and large, open spaces.

1974

- 44 per cent of Beltline residents are between the ages of 20 and 34 (compared with 25 per cent of all Calgarians who fall within this age group).
- Called Calgary's bedroom community because apartments make up 90 per cent of the Beltline's accommodation.
- Singles make up about 62 per cent of the area's households.
- Called the most parks-deficient community in the city.

1978

- Families with children leave the area as highrise apartments replace single-family homes.

1979

- Calgary planning commission approves development of three new office buildings, including a 15-storey office tower estimated to cost \$8 million.

1981

- Development Appeal Board approves a development with more than twice the density permitted under the city's land-use bylaw.

1983

- Beltline population is about 13,000.
- Grant provided by the province to investigate the high incidence of crime in the area.

1988

- City police plan a crackdown on male prostitutes in the Beltline.

2000

- Dominated by the 25-to-34 age group.

- 95 per cent of Beltline dwellings are apartments (7,524), with only 16 per cent of them owner-occupied.
- 16 per cent are employed in business services, followed by 13 per cent in the retail and wholesale trades.
- Land use: Primarily residential-multi-dwelling (39 per cent), followed by commercial (36 per cent).
- The area has changed to primarily medium- and high-density commercial/office buildings, apartments and townhouses.

2001

- 17th Avenue retail strip ranks in the top 10 in Canada.
- Beltline called Calgary's densest community.

2002

- Connaught/West Victoria Special Study suggests the community will grow from 17,000 in 2002 to about 40,000 in 10 to 20 years.

Compiled by Janet Speers

Sources: Calgary Herald Archives, City of Calgary Web site

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This story features a factbox "History of the Beltline district (Connaught/West Victoria) ".

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