

Calgary eyes inner city renewal

A planned development called Stampede Station could finally spur revitalization of the neglected Victoria Park community
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Special to The Globe and Mail

Tuesday, Apr. 15,
2003

UPDATED AT 2:03 PM EDT

CALGARY -- A \$300-million development planned next to Calgary's Stampede Park could alter this city's downtown core and revitalize one of its most neglected historic neighbourhoods.

Last month, Calgary's planning commission approved the first phase of a three-part development dubbed Stampede Station -- an ambitious combination of new office towers, retail, upscale hotel space, and high-rise housing that will turn a long-vacant surface parking lot along Macleod Trail into a daily destination for thousands of city residents.

"When it's totally built out, there will be 14,000 people a day on this site," similar to the Eaton Centre downtown, says Hannes Kovac of **Opus Building Corp.**, the Calgary-based builder that will develop the 7½-acre site in a joint venture with **WAM Development Group** of Edmonton.

Stampede Station, which will take shape directly west of the site of the annual Calgary Exhibition and Stampede, will provide more than one million square feet of new commercial space. It will have 650,000 square feet of office space, 94,000 square feet of retail, a 300-room hotel, and what will be the city's largest parkade, with more than 2,500 stalls.

Phase I includes the first office towers -- nine storeys and 14 storeys -- street-level retail, and both surface and underground parkades.

It is slated to start this summer on the northeast quadrant of the property.

The developers expect to complete the first phase by fall, 2004, and, if other pending deals are finalized soon, Phase II, the hotel and residential components, could be finished shortly thereafter. The final phase of the project, a mirror image of the Phase I office and retail development in the northwest corner of the property, will follow.

While there are no firm tenants for the office or retail space yet, Mr. Kovac says negotiations are continuing with Marriott to develop a hotel in the southeast portion of the property. It may eventually be connected to the Stampede Park's Roundup Centre by an enclosed pedestrian bridge. The developers are also

getting ready to close a deal with other investors for the condominiums, 500 residential units in two towers, on the property's southwest corner, he says.

"These business agreements still have to be negotiated," Mr. Kovac says, "but we are pushing forward and we are ready to go in for our development permits. We're just waiting for these big deals to fall into place."

The city-owned site -- two square city blocks bordered by Macleod Trail, 1 Street SE and 13th and 15th avenues -- was purchased from Toronto developer Robert Campeau in 1990 and has been vacant for years. It was once slated for a new convention centre (since built elsewhere), and then held as part of the proposed 2005 Expo site (the bid since awarded to Nagoya, Japan). Now it functions as a massive gravel parking lot, filled only during trade shows, hockey games and the annual summer fair.

Once Stampede Station goes ahead, the project could spur long-delayed development throughout Victoria Park, a sparsely populated, inner city community.

The historic Victoria Park neighbourhood has long been one of the city's most high-profile examples of urban decay, situated as it is between such popular tourist destinations as the Calgary Tower, the centre for performing arts and the exhibition and Stampede grounds. In decline for years, many of its historic homes have become seedy rooming houses that, along with a disproportionate number of vacant lots and empty buildings, have made the area a magnet for other urban problems such as prostitution and drugs. Continuing squabbles between the local community and the Stampede over the latter's expansion plans didn't help to instill confidence in investors, so Victoria Park, despite its inner city advantages, seemed to be stuck in development limbo.

"When we started this process, there were certainly different views of the world and we had to find out what each of the stakeholders wanted," says WAM Development's president Guy Scott, describing the sometimes challenging consultation process during the planning stages of the project.

"We've had an enormous amount of input from everyone from the BRZ [Victoria Crossing Business Revitalization Zone] to the city and the Victoria Park community, but in the end it's been an incredibly positive group to work with."

By merging the many disparate local perspectives for this megaproject, a vision for future developments in this part of the city may have finally been cemented. In fact, there is a sense that this project could spawn many others. The newly branded Victoria Crossing BRZ takes in both the dilapidated residential neighbourhood and the mixed business district along the downtown's southeast edge. The eponymous business group is pinning its hopes on Stampede Station becoming a strong new business core for the area.

"Stampede Station is so important to the Victoria Park redevelopment plan," says Eileen Stan, head of the Victoria Crossing BRZ, which has championed the area with marketing campaigns to position it as the city's trendy new urban neighbourhood. "This is a key piece of property, because it's a surface level parking lot now, and that doesn't make Macleod Trail a very nice place to walk," she adds.

"Not having a 24/7 environment in the neighbourhood contributes to the problems in the area," she says.

But with historic buildings, old brick warehouses being converted for loft living and high-tech businesses, and new commercial/residential projects such as Stampede Station, Ms. Stan says Victoria Crossing could soon have the panache of Vancouver's Yaletown.

"A lot of warehouses have already been reclaimed for new offices and condos," Ms. Stan says, "so you'll have this wonderful turn-of-the-century character and also have modern elements emerging. We're encouraging density -- we're trying to build the amenities that will make living in this urban community viable," she says.

"We're trying to achieve something that Calgary does not have, a true urban community."

While some major businesses have closed in the area, notably the downtown Calgary Co-op grocery store, others are already moving in. Critical Mass -- the Calgary-based e-commerce company with clients such as Mercedes-Benz, Nike and Dell -- has converted a historic warehouse for the 240 employees in its head office.

IBM Canada Ltd. recently relocated its Calgary office to a new building in Victoria Crossing, and the neighbourhood is attracting a high proportion of computer, design, architecture and communications companies.

Another city developer recently purchased 21 acres from Canadian Pacific Railway and plans a mixed residential/commercial development along the northern edge of the community, an area now covered by largely unused rail yards, Ms. Stan says.

And the Calgary Exhibition and Stampede continues to acquire more of the six square blocks north of its current boundary for future expansion plans that include a larger agriculture building and reclamation of 14 acres of parkland along the Elbow River. Both will change the future face of Victoria Park significantly, Ms. Stan says.

"The population is steadily increasing," she says, noting that there are now about

15,000 residents in the area.

"In 10 years, as a realistic goal, we would love to see the population in the whole district go to 40,000."

It's hard to know whether Stampede Station will be enough to kick-start the long-awaited redevelopment of this part of Calgary's downtown.

This is still a place where Calgary's disadvantaged gather, where the Mustard Seed Ministry feeds the homeless daily and has recently expanded its services to include an educational centre to help the city's least fortunate residents.

But Ms. Stan says the area's full potential "is yet to be realized." Mr. Scott says Stampede Station will go a long way to making that happen with its mixed uses and pedestrian-friendly streetscape.

"It's always difficult to get people to believe in what's going to happen before it does," Mr. Scott admits, "but once people realize what is happening here, you will see significant improvements. I suspect that over the next five years, you will see tremendous changes."

