

Beltline redevelopment is busting out

From one end to the other, this southwest district has become Calgary's trendy hot spot

Geoffrey Scotton

Driven by its proximity to downtown, lower land, lease and tax costs, streetscape improvements and easy commuter access, Calgary's Beltline is booming.

Signs of a renaissance in the slice of Calgary's southwest between 10th Avenue and 17th Avenue S.W. are everywhere: climbing retail lease rates, the announcement of a major new building complex for IBM Canada and a heightened level of on-street activity.

The latter is reflected in the vibrancy of the 17th Avenue retail strip -- now ranked among the top 10 in Canada -- and the growing emergence of 11th Avenue S.W. as a home for many of Calgary's high-tech and Internet firms.

"Throughout 2000, the Beltline reflected a very tight market for those seeking trendy office space," noted a recent report from commercial leasing firm J.J. Barnicke Calgary Ltd.

Barnicke's team believes IBM's announcement, to build a 340,000-square-foot, three building complex at 11th Avenue and 1st Street S.W. will spur further development in the Beltline.

"IBM Canada will certainly ignite activity in the east end of the Beltline," Barnicke said.

But that area is just one of several spots throughout the Beltline, named after early 1900s street car routes, that have recently experienced or are poised to experience a flurry of activity in new building or renovation.

Among them is the so-called warehouse district east of Macleod Trail, roughly between 10th Avenue and 13th Avenue S., which has seen a wave of renovation in recent years and subsequently attracted such high-profile tenants and owners as Web master Critical Mass Inc., Pangaea and Fusion Media.

Analysts say the attractions of the Beltline centre on the wide mixture of land uses, from retail to residential to commercial to institutional, and its proximity to the city core.

They also derive from the availability of land, says Richard White, president of the Calgary Downtown Association, who notes the demise of the once infamous Electric Avenue bar strip on 11th Avenue S.W. has helped as well.

"There's a lot of undeveloped land there, and it's easy for that land to be developed. It doesn't have some of the pressures the downtown land has and it sits very nicely with the Connaught residential area for people who want to live and work in the area," said White.

"It is an ideal urban community in that it's mixed use. You've got some businesses, you've got some offices, you've got some residences," he observed, noting that the decision by Safeway Canada Ltd. to renovate and expand its Connaught location -- the chain's busiest in Calgary -- gave the area a boost.

"The strength of any community is probably its grocery store. You have to eat every day and you have to go grocery shopping every week -- you don't have to go out to a restaurant and you don't have to go shopping."

And the level of activity appears unlikely to abate, according to Eileen Stan, manager of the Victoria Crossing BRZ.



Attractions of the Beltline (between 10th Avenue and 17th Avenue S.W) centre on the mix of land uses and its proximity to the city's core.

"I'm now getting calls from people, from investors who are interested in property, in land and seriously looking at development in this area and that's exciting," said Stan.

"The area is evolving."

Rob McElhoes, the senior research analyst with the Calgary office of Colliers Macaulay Nicolls Inc., said the Beltline's activity mirrors that seen in similar neighbourhoods in other large North American cities.

"It's a big city urban community now," McElhoes said. "The city is approaching a million people, it's the most densely populated (area of the city), it's adjacent to the core, and I think it's following trends we've seen in other major cities, with higher in-development focused on the demand from urban residents."

Facts: Beltline Developments

- The 1st Street S.W. corridor south of the railway tracks to 17th Avenue S.W., which has been the focus of extensive streetscaping efforts, worth more than \$1 million, by the Victoria Crossing Business Revitalization Zone and the city.
- Residential development in the Connaught neighbourhood -- Calgary's densest community -- in the west end of the Beltline, where, according to figures from the Calgary Downtown Association, 694 condominium units were added between 1997 and 2000.
- Evolving plans for a redevelopment of the so-called ATCO lands, a full block between 10th Avenue and 11th Avenue E. from 1st Street to 11th Street by Certus Developments, a company owned by Jim Mitchell and Ron Ghitter.
- Evolving plans for the so-called Campeau lands, two city-owned parking lots between 13th and 15th avenues S.W. across from the Stampede LRT station, which are set to be home to a large office and hotel complex led by developers Opus Building Building Corp. and Western Asset Management.
- The possible sale and/or redevelopment of the Calgary Co-operative Association Ltd. facility and land between 11th and 12th Avenue S.E. at Macleod Trail, which Co-op management is contemplating.
- The proposed renovation and addition to the Confederation Building at 12th Avenue and 5th Street which would see a two-storey addition to the existing building and a proposed 10-storey office tower added on the parking lot to the east.
- A proposal for a Sandman Hotel on 10th Avenue S.W. between 7th Street and 6th Street S.W. that is in the midst of design negotiations with the City of Calgary
- A proposal from Alliance-Atlantis to build the Mount Royal Theatre at 8th Street and 15th Avenue S.W., which might include an Irish pub
- Carl Safran School (Rundle College) at 12th Avenue and 13th Avenue between 8th Street and 9th Street S.W., a full city block, which may be sold and redeveloped with buildings clustered around the existing structure.
- Possible plans to expand the Mount Royal Village condos at the corner of 15th Avenue and 8th Street S.W.
- The emergence of an outdoor sports equipment and clothing mecca at 10th Avenue and 8th Street S.W. centred on the Mountain Equipment Co-op building.
- A growing conglomeration of high-tech firms along 11th Avenue S.W., drawn in part by a major fibre optic cable corridor along 10th Avenue S.W.