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[Efforts underway for eco-district in downtown Ottawa](#)

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Sometimes capitalists and environmentalists can be on the same team. Such is the case with efforts to establish Ottawa's downtown core as an eco-district.

The initiative is being pushed by a team headed by James McNeil, associate vice-president of Cushman & Wakefield's Ottawa operations and head of its green real estate practice.

The area targeted includes Parliament Hill, the downtown's main office-building district and several condominium buildings in an area that lies immediately southwest of where the Rideau Canal meets the Ottawa River.

McNeil said the eco-district movement would capitalize on a number of things already underway, such as the building of a light-rail tunnel through downtown Ottawa, the development of more energy-efficient buildings, the growing popularity of green roofs, municipal efforts to make cycling and walking easier, and plans underway for district energy projects.

“So how do we now take some of these initiatives that are happening, put a big bow around it and start to tie that back into an economic-development strategy?” he said.

Environmentalism and economics

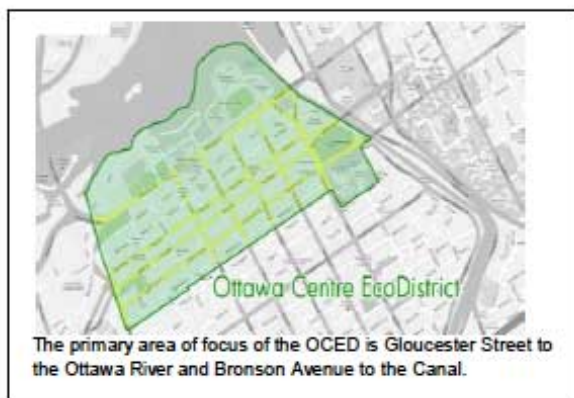
Unlike situations where environmentalism seems at odds with efforts to grow the economy, anyone who spends time speaking with McNeil can see that, in his mind, the two goals go hand-in-hand in the nation's capital.

Given that the biggest user of downtown office space, the federal government, is embarking on a path of using up less real estate per worker and having a greater proportion of its operations outside of downtown Ottawa, McNeil said it's time for commercial landlords and builders to attract more large multinational corporations that are increasingly concerned with operating in an environmentally sustainable way.

“What we're seeing is a trend toward CSR (corporate social responsibility) sustainability,” he said.

McNeil noted that companies such as Microsoft Corp. are aiming for carbon neutrality, while others such as banking giant HSBC are already there. Companies recognize that being environmentally responsible is good for their public image, resulting in more customers, and also that better efficiency leads to money saved, he said.

“Clearly, organizations have started to realize that (sustainability) provides top-line and bottom-line results,” McNeil said.



What is an eco-district?

An eco-district is an area recognized as having businesses, residents and other stakeholders committed to the common cause of working toward a more sustainable area through design and practice.

McNeil cited other cities where this has happened, such as Portland, Ore., Seattle and Washington, D.C., and added that efforts are underway to do this in downtown Toronto.

He said being recognized as an eco-district is not yet a highly formalized process — like LEED certification — but more of a reputational thing.

One of the key elements of making downtown Ottawa an eco-district, he said, would be measuring things such as carbon emissions and energy usage, and making comparisons to previous periods in the same area and comparable districts in other cities.

While there's a lot in place already to help make Ottawa's core an eco-district, more needs to be done, McNeil said.

“What you're really looking at is an engagement strategy,” he said. “If you look at the building sector, they're referring to it as tenant-engagement strategies or occupier-engagement strategies.”

McNeil said he envisions a “one-stop shop” for which residents, businesses or any group or individual involved with the downtown core can get information about how to help create a more environmentally friendly district. This could include information on greener ways of energy usage, waste disposal and transportation, among other things.

He said there would likely be a fair amount of buy-in from residents and businesses, given that many have chosen

to locate downtown because they believe in the principles of sustainability.

Who’s involved?

The steering committee to establish downtown Ottawa as an eco-district has a range of participants including people from the local real estate industry and public bodies, such as the City of Ottawa and Hydro Ottawa. At this time, no one from the federal government is involved but McNeil said he hopes that changes because of the government’s ongoing importance to downtown Ottawa.

Among those who are on the eco-district steering committee is Paul Barton, manager of green buildings for [Minto Group Inc.](#)

Asked why he’s part of the project, Barton said: “I’ve just seen good examples of (eco-districts) in other cities in the world, and it seemed like a good thing to be engaged with both to help the industry in Ottawa . . . and also just to try to bring something additional to Ottawa that could add to a capital city being a world-class city.”

Among the green accomplishments of Minto is being the first builder to seek out LEED Gold status on a new office building in Ottawa, its demonstration house in the Ottawa community of Manotick that produces as much energy as it uses, and the MintoMidtown in Toronto, which the company says is the largest LEED Gold-certified condo development in North America.

Barton said such proven commitments to green development have helped Minto because it “provided a backdrop for us to be walking the talk.”

Another person who is promoting the idea of an eco-district in Ottawa is Mark Brandt, a local architect/urbanist who is eying Chaudiere and Victoria islands, located on the Ottawa River just west of downtown, for such a designation.

(Read: An Architects' Vision For An InterProvincial Eco-District That Spans The Ottawa River, [Property Biz Canada](#), June 19, 2012)

McNeil said Brandt’s idea is “complimentary” to what he’s proposing for downtown but feels his initiative is further ahead because more of the infrastructure and associated planning is already in place.

He added that it is premature to speculate what the monetary cost of creating a downtown Ottawa eco-district would be. He anticipates that, whatever it is, it will be paid for by both the private-sector players who stand to benefit most and various levels of government.

Download a preliminary brochure about the [Ottawa Centre Ecodistrict](#)

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