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Ottawa Citizen: Eco-district may help build downtown buzz

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Promoters look to green projects to raise city's profile

By Derek Abma, Ottawa Citizen November 2, 2012

A stretch of central Ottawa might soon be defined by its dedication to environmental sustainability.

Separate efforts are underway to create what are known as eco-districts – one in the western portion of downtown Ottawa, and another on Chaudière and Victoria islands on the Ottawa River just north of downtown.

Eco-districts are distinguished by a commitment among

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residents, businesses and developers of an area to do things in ways that minimize environmental impact in a measurable way. That applies to things such as the way buildings are constructed, transportation, energy usage and waste disposal.

In Canada, Vancouver and Victoria are among the cities with areas considered eco-districts, according to the Portland Sustainability Institute. Portland, Ore., is seen as one of the leading cities in this movement and recently hosted the EcoDistricts Summit, featuring urban experts from around the world.

The downtown Ottawa effort – covering the area bordered by the Rideau Canal to the east, Bronson Avenue to the west, Gloucester Street to the south and the Ottawa River to the north – is led by James McNeil, associate vice-president of Cushman & Wakefield Ottawa, a provider of commercial real estate services.

McNeil says making downtown Ottawa an eco-district would be beneficial to his sector and the local economy overall. He explains that owners and managers of downtown office buildings face uncertainty as their biggest tenant, the federal government, downsizes staff, follows a new directive of using less space per employee and puts more of its operations outside the city's core. Creating an eco-district would help commercial landlords attract prominent private-sector tenants, who are increasingly focused on establishing environmentally friendly reputations, McNeil says.

"You've got Microsoft's quest for carbon neutrality," he says. "Look at HSBC being the first carbon-neutral bank in the world."

It's an idea that makes sense to Diane Holmes, city councillor for the area. "It's a great marketing way for



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Ottawa to move in the future, that we're a green city," she says.

Holmes says there are number of things the city could do to help, such as minimizing red tape to install charging stations for electric vehicles.

McNeil says several things are already happening to make Ottawa's core an example of sustainability, such as the coming light-rail system, Laurier Avenue's segregated bicycle lanes with prospects for more, and new buildings being designed to increasingly high environmental standards.

Becoming an eco-district, McNeil says, would involve externally promoting what's happening already. It would also require the creation of a department that would advise on what more can be done, and be a source of information for residents and businesses wanting to get involved.

It's unknown how much that project would cost, though McNeil envisions it as a partnership between the private sector and various levels of government.

Meanwhile, architect Mark Brandt is promoting the idea of an eco-district on Chaudière and Victoria islands. He sees it as a "very special place" due to its historical ties to Canada's founding cultures of First Nations, English and French, its place within country's industrial history as a centre for the lumber industry and hydroelectricity generation, and its natural beauty.

The capacity for producing hydro on the islands would complement efforts to make it an environmentally sustainable district, he says. "That is the greenest form of energy on the planet," he says.

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Facilitating environment-ally efficient modes of transportation, such as public transit and cycling, to and around the islands, would also be key to establishing the area as an eco-district, Brandt says.

He says an objective assessment of the community’s sustainability, measured against a standard such as LEED for Neighbourhood Development, would also be needed to establish credibility.

Brandt would like to see a significant employer establish itself as an anchor there, complemented by a variety of small-scale commercial operations, such as restaurants and shops. Much of the area would be kept in its natural state.

Brandt doesn’t rule out residential development but feels a “rash of condominiums” would spoil the uniqueness of the islands.

Asked about the cost of his ideas, Brandt doesn’t provide a number but instead twists the question around: “What’s the cost of not going sustainable? The cost is that we could pay for it in the destruction of cities; the downfall of everything we’ve got.”

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