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Proposed Eco-District in Ottawa Centre Aims to Make Ottawa Greener

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Story by Mike Lapointe



An eco-friendly roof (Photo by Ryan Somma via Wikimedia Commons)

A holistic approach to greening Ottawa's downtown core is something the city is missing.

Ottawa Ecology is the largest organization in the city focused on local environmental issues according to their website. The organization will be hosting a panel discussion this Thursday about the creation of the "Ottawa Centre Eco-District."

According to the organization's press release, an eco-district is "a neighbourhood committed to sustainability that links green buildings, smart infrastructure and behaviour to meet ambitious sustainability goals over time."

The Ottawa Centre Eco-District is "an initiative to accelerate neighbourhood-scale sustainability in the downtown core while increasing Ottawa's competitiveness, citizen's quality of life and property owner's return on investment," according to Ecology Ottawa.

Panelists will discuss what type of technologies will help make Ottawa more green, as well as outlining how various businesses can benefit from city-wide green initiatives.

Ottawa is well on its way to becoming a leading green city in Canada. From the construction of certified green buildings to establishing sustainable transportation

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initiatives, policymakers and business leaders in Canada's capital are busy making the city more livable for residents – and more attractive for incoming businesses.

But as much as the city has done so far, green advocates working with the organization want to speed that process up and make sure businesses and the city are on the same page.

James McNeil works for Cushman and Wakefield Ottawa, an organization that provides commercial real estate services in the city.

He is heavily involved with the eco-district initiative in the city and is a self-described leading advocate of green buildings and their effects on climate change.

McNeil says he is aware that the city already has a number of green initiatives in place. But he contends that as the nation's capital, and as one of Canada's largest cities, Ottawa is still lagging behind comparable municipalities that have more comprehensive and long-term green strategies in place.

"I love this city. I do my business in this city, and I'm concerned," McNeil said.

"Here in Ottawa, right now, we have 30 certified green buildings downtown. But on the other side, there's not even a recycle bin on our transit way on Albert St."

"I'm not going to say that the city of Ottawa hasn't looked at a green initiatives – but I don't think they've done a really great job of creating those linkages between livability, sustainability, business and commerce."

Advocates of the eco-district initiative hope to bolster pre-existing environmental sustainability targets by establishing a comprehensive plan connecting a number of independent initiatives together.

"You've got a culture of sustainability that is rocketing through the business community, the local community and the rest. But we really don't have that vision of leadership from the city's standpoint," McNeil said.

"This plan is an opportunity for linking sustainability with the city's economic development strategy."

For McNeil, sustainable municipal engineering in the downtown core and job creation go hand-in-hand. He believes that wide-spread green initiatives will attract businesses interested in lowering their environmental impact.

In terms of sustainable transportation networks in the city that complement pre-existing green building strategies downtown, McNeil thinks Ottawa is on the right track.

"We have some wonderful initiatives that are happening downtown. You've got green buildings, you've got the growing list of segregated bike lanes and those BIXI bikes – the list kind of goes on and on."

Ecology Ottawa's plan also involves building electric vehicle charging stations downtown as well as a number of stands where cyclists can repair their bikes. For McNeil however, there is one specific transportation project in the works that will help put Ottawa on par with other major Canadian municipalities.

"I think the big change will have to do with the light rail – I think that is a very important fundamental change for the city that will really help to make Ottawa more sustainable. I think that one of the things the city has to become very conscious of is the linkages to the transportation infrastructure."

"We've got to start thinking about these things to create that more livable, walk-able type of a city."

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Although he says that policymakers in Ottawa still had a lot to do to catch up with cities like Montreal and Vancouver that already have well-established green initiatives in place, McNeil was happy with the organization's progress in the last year.

"We just basically started putting this together in May, so it's a relatively new initiative," McNeil said.

"I was actually pleasantly surprised and somewhat taken aback by the speed in which this has taken off as an idea."

"What we have now is an opportunity to link community businesses and what's been happening now with the private sector in Ottawa. Moving that forward, it's time to see if we can accelerate the greening of the downtown core," McNeil said.

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About Mike Lapointe

I'm originally from London and I enjoy biking, taking pictures of nature, and long meandering walks on nature trails. My favourite thing to do in Ottawa is to put on my mittens and go for a nice long skate on the Rideau Canal.

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