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National capitals must serve as environmental leaders, 'Green' real estate professionals were told at a recent Better Buildings Breakfast at Ottawa's City Hall.

"Capital cities are about possibilities," said Marcel Acosta, the executive director of the [National Capital Planning Commission](#) in Washington, D.C. "We don't do enough in our capital cities."

"I think one of the fundamental challenges and opportunities for places like Ottawa, for Washington, D.C., for Canberra, Australia, for London, for Paris, is really to set an example for the rest of the world. I think what we're doing in terms of our ecodistrict initiatives in Washington, D.C., and what you're proposing here in Ottawa are examples of how we can illustrate to the people of our countries about what's possible for making our planet a more sustainable place."

Partnerships and persuasion make things happen

Acosta, the keynote speaker at the [Ecodistricts: A Capital Idea](#) breakfast event, had to admit he was a tad skeptical when he began work on Washington's [SW Ecodistrict Initiative](#) several years ago.

"We started about three years ago and at the time we thought it was a kind of pie-in-the-sky project," said

Acosta, who brought more than 25 years of experience in urban and transportation planning to the assignment.

“But things happened. A lot of things have converged where a lot of these proposals that we put forward have actually been implemented, but it did take a lot of partnership-building. It did take a lot of persuasion with a lot of folks in order to get there,” he said.

“This plan was really an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to transform an existing federal enclave. . . It’s pretty barren, it’s boring, and pretty depressing when you’re there, not a very inviting workplace. If you go there at night, it’s basically like an empty bowling alley; there’s not much going on in this community.”

The 15-block federal precinct might have been boring, but it was still a realtor’s dream.

“When you’re talking real estate, you’re really talking location, location, location,” said Acosta, “because it fronts the [National Mall](#) and the other side fronts the Potomac River. In terms of our city’s standards, it’s a pretty spectacular location.

“Given this location, next to the National Mall, I go back to what capital cities should be doing. We have 20 million visitors who come to Washington, D.C., every year from all across the world. Why not build a sustainability showcase right next to the mall to show people what a sustainable city and neighbourhood could look like?”



It spurred the U.S. federal government to take action, such as covering 40 per cent of the SW Ecodistrict with tree canopy and making 35 per cent of the surface area able to absorb storm water in an underground storage system. It also meant lowering green house gas emissions by 51 per cent and recycling 75 per cent of construction material as the 50-year-old buildings are retrofitted.

“It forced a lot of federal agencies to figure out what they were going to do because the thinking here is the federal government ‘we talk the talk, we want a more sustainable planet’ is a big policy initiative . . .you have to walk the talk,” Acosta said. “And so essentially by establishing these really stringent targets to get federal buildings to zero net energy, it forces the federal government to think these things through.

“There are a lot of amazing things in terms of technology transfer that can occur, because if we do a lot of these things it will eventually get out to the private sector and to other local communities so that they can adopt these best practices as their own. The federal government has to lead the way.”

Ottawa Centre Eco-district at early stage but time is right

James McNeil, co-chair of the proposed [Ottawa Centre Eco-district](#) (OCED), was one of many in the audience to be inspired by Acosta’s speech.

“A capital needs to show what can be done,” he said, echoing Acosta’s words. “That resonated with me. As the

capital of Canada, we need to show leadership.”

The OCED leadership is expected to take the form of a non-profit corporation and a board of directors within the next year. The proposed downtown core site corresponds roughly to that of the Downtown Moves study, which aims to make the downtown more people-friendly.

As McNeil pointed out, with the federal government shifting office locations, the time is right to transform the core.

According to its introductory handout, “the OCED will be a unique collaboration between developers, building owners, tenant businesses, employees, residents, social innovators, and the city to make the core more sustainable, competitive and vibrant and to advance Ottawa’s reputation as a dynamic capital city.”



Elected officials endorse Ottawa ecodistrict

The effort has officially received the blessing of Yasir Naqvi, MPP for Ottawa Centre.

“I strongly believe this effort will help to attract investment and create jobs in the downtown core while supporting our larger community vision for sustainability,” he said in a statement.

“I have been proud to be part of a government that has invested in Ontario’s future by investing in jobs, growth, and innovation. Economic development remains a top priority for our government and for me personally. I will continue work with you, the community and your steering committee to ensure that we find support for Ottawa Centre Ecodistrict.”

Ottawa City Councillor Marie McRae, who doubles as chair of the city’s environment committee, is also on board.

“Ultimately, all of these initiatives (such as ecodistricts, Ottawa River Action Plan and the future LRT) are about exploring ways to keep our local economy and our environment vibrant and healthy and the message is one doesn’t have to come at the expense of the other. If you have an energy-efficient building, it costs a little more to build it, but at end of the day, you’re more green and it’s actually going to be cheaper to run.”

“We’ve seen that lasting green initiatives such as green building practices also have increased employment opportunities and at the end of the day, the communities are healthier. So we know that by increasing green building practices, again it’s not only good for the environment, but it’s certainly good for business.”

Creating terrific neighbourhoods

When it comes to defining an ecodistrict, however, Acosta prefers to keep it simple.

“I think the bottom line is – and you should think of ecodistricts in this way – when you take all these collective actions that we’re doing in terms of protecting our environment and with respect to sustainability ‘the whole is greater than the sum of the parts,’ ” Acosta said.

“Because if you look at your respective neighbourhoods and if you look at the activities that are going on in your community, I think what you’re going to be seeing is that there are a lot of individuals, a lot of companies, a lot of property owners that are doing their thing to contribute to a more sustainable city, a more sustainable community.”

In the not-too-distant future, Acosta hopes he won’t need to provide a definition at all.

“At some point in time, people will not be thinking that this is an ecodistrict, they’re just going to think that this is a great place that actually has a lot of things that you want to accomplish in terms of sustainability,” he said.

“We’re calling them ecodistricts because we’re trying to illustrate best practices, but at the end of the day you just want people to say, ‘You know, this neighbourhood in Washington, D.C., is just terrific.’

“It isn’t today, but that’s really where you want to go.”

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