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City's downtown growing fastest

Core housing strategy finally released

By: **Bartley Kives**

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New condominium buildings now line Waterfront Drive downtown.

Downtown Winnipeg's population is growing faster than the city-wide average, but there are obstacles to continued growth, according to a downtown housing strategy city councillors have waited five years to read.

Over the past years, the population of downtown Winnipeg increased by 6.8 per cent, from 13,470 in 2006 to 14,385 at the end of 2010, according to the Downtown Residential Development Strategy made public by the city Thursday.

Report shows pace of downtown residential construction rising

700

Apartment or condo units added to downtown between 2003 and 2010

446

Units under construction downtown right now

700

Additional downtown housing units expected by 2015

1,500

Additional units expected between 2016 and 2020.

-- Source: City of Winnipeg, *Downtown Residential Development Strategy*

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Although that amounted to only 915 more people downtown, this growth outpaced the city-wide average of 4.8 per cent in the same period.

And the recent acceleration in downtown apartment and condominium construction could allow downtown growth to quadruple the city-wide average during the coming decade, when 4,600 of Winnipeg's projected 50,000 new residents are expected to live downtown.

According to the report, authored by city housing manager Stan Dueck, 700 new residential units -- apartments and condominiums -- were created downtown between 2003 and 2010.

But another 446 are under construction and another 700 are expected to follow by 2015, thanks in part to city-provincial tax incentives intended to stimulate the creation of more city housing.

"The data suggests momentum is building," writes Dueck, who identifies the Exchange District as the downtown neighbourhood with the most potential for population growth.

Currently, the Exchange has the smallest population among downtown's eight neighbourhoods. This is mainly because residential development in the former warehouse district is a relatively recent phenomenon. Broadway-Assiniboine and Central Park, which were built up in the 1960s and 1970s,

currently account for 65 per cent of downtown's population.

Dueck's report identifies several dozen ways to build upon downtown's current population growth. Most of them are common-sense suggestions about improving downtown safety, transit access and parking.

Real or perceived inadequacies in all these areas may scare developers and residents away from downtown, Dueck writes, identifying surface-parking lots as a particular obstacle toward any effort to increase the density of a downtown currently riddled with the concrete "dead zones" dreaded by city planners.

"Parking remains an issue, particularly if more surface lots are converted to residential development in the future," Dueck writes. "As parking demand grows, surface lots become more lucrative and more costly to convert."

Even though downtown residents are more likely to use transit, walk or ride a bike to get around than their suburban counterparts, developers find it tough to market condos without parking, Dueck writes. This may change in the future, as downtown Winnipeg's density improves.

Meantime, city council downtown-development chairman Justin Swandel (St. Norbert) said the city has already exceeded its downtown housing goals. Winnipeg's next step should be to wean developers off government incentives, he suggested.

"We've shown we can grow at a rate faster than that of the rest of the city," he said. "One of our goals is to get to a place where we no longer have to provide incentives to live downtown and make it a place people want to live."

The city still needs to improve downtown streetscapes to make them more pedestrian-friendly, said Swandel, who characterized most of the recommendations in the downtown residential development strategy as obvious. But he praised the report for coming up with a framework to measure success.

Transcona Coun. Russ Wyatt, who ordered the report in 2006 in the wake of Mayor Sam Katz's City Summit, said he is relieved to see the downtown housing strategy finally see the light of day.

"I think it's ridiculous. The report was ready a long time ago and it should have been issued a long time ago," said Wyatt, a former downtown-development chairman.

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