

DEVELOPMENT

How can Toronto blend condos and community? Add to ...

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Vicki Trottier and her husband are both avid cyclists who have to lock up their bikes outside because there's no storage in their condo. When they take their dog for a walk by the water, they have to scramble across the many lanes of busy traffic on Lake Shore Boulevard.

"You have to scurry to make it across," she says. Exercising in the building can pose the opposite problem – too much standing around waiting.

"We have 300-something units in our building and we've got this tiny little gym," she says. "There's two treadmills."

And the Trottiers, like their neighbours in the Lake Shore and Bathurst area, are still waiting for a park that developers promised about seven years ago.

The Trottiers moved from Haileybury, about 150 kilometres north of North Bay, to their condo in 2011. They chose the building because it is close to downtown and near the lake. But despite the advantages of geography, life as a condo resident is rife with problems – from traffic to a lack of green space or amenities inside the buildings.

In the last decade, the condo boom in Toronto has stacked the skyline with towers. Now, the approximately 250,000 to 275,000 people who live in them say that, in the race to build, city planners and councillors failed to adequately consider how to create neighbourhoods.

But the city is finally starting to listen. "I don't think we anticipated, say, five years ago, or even before that, that this boom was going to continue," says Peter Moore, project manager for the City of Toronto. Last month, the city launched the first of its kind series of public consultations to improve conditions for condo dwellers.

The initiative is an acknowledgment that Toronto's condo culture is here to stay. As the consults give a voice to the people in this community, what's being heard is that condo living has myriad issues – and that greater attention needs to be paid to addressing them as more and more buildings break ground.

"It's time, as we review the official plan and the province reviews the Condominium Act, to understand what the people who live in these buildings actually experience, as residents in vertical neighbourhoods," says councillor Adam Vaughan, who proposed the consultations.

The four public meetings – held downtown, in Scarborough, Etobicoke and North York – are now over, and an online survey will be launched in early March.

Another round of consultations will be held in early summer. A report is expected to be sent to council by the fall, although there is no fixed date for implementing whatever recommendations are made.

Jennifer Keesmaat, the city's chief planner, says that, while it is too soon to speculate about specific recommendations that might come from the consultations, it is very likely the process will have implications for the official plan.

"We need to be thinking much more extensively about ... condos not as buildings but as part of a neighbourhood," she says. "We're seeing a significant transition in the landscape and the form of the city at this moment that really is the impetus for us beginning to think in new ways about how neighbourhoods are defined in the city."

If the issues raised at the consultations don't find their way into the big picture of the official plan, they will almost certainly impact the city's approach to condos. That could mean requiring more spaces for children to play inside condos or decks for pet owners, among other items, Mr. Vaughan says.

"It may be small stuff, but I think it will be substantial for the people that are making homes and neighbourhoods out of these tall buildings," he says.

Toronto's condo boom began gaining momentum in 1999. Since that time, more than 120,000 condo units have been completed, close to 55,000 of which were finished after the financial downturn that began in 2008. And the momentum shows few, if any, signs of slowing: As of January of this year, there were 40,474 condo units under construction in Toronto, according to the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

Everyone from seniors who have downsized to young singles just starting first careers call condos home.

Don Henderson, vice-president of the Humber Bay Shores Condominium Association, a group that represents 18 buildings in Etobicoke, wants to know why the city is only now stopping to ask what issues condo residents face.

"They should have come up with a plan well before now," he says. The city and developers are "both winning on runaway development. Who's losing are the people that are left behind to live in those communities."

Oksana Ermolenko, who moved into a condo in the Humber Bay area late last year, attended one of the public meetings.

"There is a lot of development going on, so I think it's great the city is holding these consultations," she says.

Issues raised at the consultations have differed by area. People at the downtown meeting were more vocal about the need for better cycling infrastructure and parking space than were those at the Etobicoke meeting, where there were frequent complaints about inadequate TTC service for those who face longer commutes into the core.

But there has been much more overlap than differences in the issues raised. A need for more green space and places to walk pets was frequently voiced. So too was a desire for better retail at street level beyond fast-food restaurants and dry cleaners. Many people also criticized the city for letting developers get away with shoddy construction: One man at the Etobicoke meeting said he could hear his neighbours through the walls talking on their phones and closing cupboards. Others asked for larger communal spaces so that residents could have more interaction with each other. Some asked for grocery stores and community centres.

The list goes on. While it runs the gamut from small issues such as better gyms to much larger concerns over things like traffic, the clear desire is for policies that will help create communities – places where you put down roots and know your neighbours and can walk to a coffee shop or the park when you leave your building.

“I’m in an area where there are a lot of new buildings going up but not a lot of services,” says Ms. Ermolenko. “There is a lot more need for coffee shops and small retail. There’s only so much time you can spend in your own building before you want to enjoy the outdoors.”