

Crane spotting

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Crane spotting is set to overtake hand-wringing as the preoccupation in downtown Hamilton this year.

City officials say there are enough projects in the works to see up to eight construction cranes dotting the skyline in 2012, certainly a sight not seen in a very long time.

"My guess is that it would be unparalleled in the city's history," said Glen Norton, manager of the urban renewal division. "Perhaps in the '60s or '70s when they were building Jackson Square and Hamilton Place, but I doubt there's ever been seven or eight cranes in this city's downtown at once."

While some of these projects have broken ground, others are still commitments on paper only. Two have just recently passed Ontario Municipal Board appeals.

Norton cautions that there are no guarantees that every proposed project will happen in 2012 — market conditions, financing arrangements and a range of business decisions could delay or even halt some of them.

What he is hopeful about is the long-agonized-

over Royal Connaught, which many see as the linchpin of a true downtown renaissance. No deals have been announced and the property owners are silent, yet city officials say there is something in the works



Crane_sites.C.eps.

at the vacant hotel.

So the guy charged with turning around the downtown is pumped.

“How good will it be to see cranes downtown? Most people can’t remember when they saw cranes downtown.”

Norton says there are other projects in the pipeline that could boost the crane count but it’s too early to discuss them publicly.

The biggest development is Darko Vranich’s \$125-million condo and hotel plan in a block of land bounded by King, Main, Bay and Hess. He plans four buildings, containing 600 condo units, two hotels and retail space. The first hotel, a 129-room Staybridge at the corner of George and Caroline is under construction.

It is seen as an important link between the Hess entertainment district and the core.

The next biggest is the McMaster health campus, planned for what is now the home of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board head office at Main and Bay. That \$80-million development is expected bring more than 360 employees, 4,000 students and 54,000 patients downtown.

Mac and the school board are still negotiating a deal on the property.

Another key project is Acclamation Lofts on James Street North. Architect John Mokrycke says the plan for a seven-storey mixed use development was upheld in an OMB appeal earlier this month.

“We can apply for building permits as soon as the design is finished, and the developer is bugging me to get it done.”

The \$20-million plan put forward by the Roque family, owners of Acclamation Bar and Grill and a local roofing company, calls for 60 condo units, retail space on the ground floor, an expanded restaurant, banquet hall and office space.

Mokrycke says his client is eager to get moving because of market demand.

“There is huge demand in the Hamilton market but there hasn’t been the product there. A large number of people want to move downtown.”

A plan by Options for Homes Hamilton to erect a 12-storey, 110-unit mixed income condo at the corner of Queen and King also recently cleared hurdles at the OMB over height and parking variances.

The project, estimated at roughly \$25 million, still needs site plan approval and a building permit, said project co-ordinator Matt Childs. It is to be built on the site of a closed Anglican church that has fallen into disrepair.

Options for Homes, a Toronto company with affiliates elsewhere, is a nonprofit that offers zero interest second mortgages for down payments to those who couldn't afford home ownership under traditional financing.

Other projects are well under way.

The first of three planned nine-storey City Square condo towers sold out last year and is under construction. Work is slated to begin this year on the second tower. The location, at Park and Robinson streets, is the home of the former Thistle Club.

The same developer, New Horizon Development Group, is also part of Urban West, a 33-unit condo development being constructed on the site of a former Tim Hortons outlet at Dundurn and Aberdeen.

The potential wild card in all the optimism is the Royal Connaught. The former grand hotel has been the focus of a number of failed dreams since it saw its last overnight guest in 2004.

Plans for the Connaught — revealed by city officials in August but never publicly commented on by developers Tony Valeri and Rudi Spallacci — point to ambitions to redevelop the 13-storey building as a boutique hotel and condos, adding two storeys to the structure.

"If (the developers) make the progress they're hoping for, it's not out of the question to see a crane there this year," said Norton.

He says there are several reasons why the cranes may be lining up in the core. The first is a growing desire among young people and boomers to live downtown, which is reviving many North American cities.

"People want to be able to walk to amenities and take transit to work. The empty nesters are saying, 'Why am I driving out to the suburbs every night? I want to live downtown.'"

Norton himself is in that demographic and will move into a condo in the Witton Lofts when the Murray Street development in a former school is completed.

As the demand grows, so does the price people are willing to pay to buy downtown. That makes it financially feasible for developers to build new condos or retrofit older buildings, says Norton.

Bank financing has loosened and city incentives, including waived development charges and residential loan programs, have helped make downtown projects more attractive for property owners.

Norton says buying a condo in downtown Hamilton is a lifestyle choice as opposed to a necessity, as it is in Toronto or Vancouver.

"People there can't afford single family homes in the city and don't want to commute from the suburbs,

so they don't have a choice but to buy a condo. It's different in Hamilton."

Along with residential growth, job numbers are climbing. Numbers revealed this week by the city show net growth of 320 jobs downtown, mostly in the creative, scientific and education sectors. That's more than double the average yearly job growth of the past decade.

There are 23,925 jobs at 1,574 locations in the urban centre, bounded roughly by Victoria, Queen, Hunter and Cannon and including James Street, North and South.

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