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Vibrant downtown: housing is just the start

By: Stefano Grande

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With Thursday's announcement of a $20-million tax incentive package from the province and city to stimulate more downtown housing, the City of Winnipeg's soon-to-be-released Downtown Housing Strategy has a fighting chance of succeeding. A development tool that addresses the economic challenges of constructing downtown is now in place. This will expedite downtown housing development because it will be more affordable -- an issue the public and our BIZ members have been vociferous about.

The only question that needs to be answered now is whether implementation will be executed through a shotgun approach (i.e. "Let's just get housing units out there"), or through a comprehensive and planned one that uses housing to add social, economic and urban value, guaranteeing the type of downtown that is our ultimate vision -- the most vibrant and charming neigbourhood in the city that is completely walkable and has a 24-hour hustle and bustle atmosphere.

The true success of our downtown lies in understanding of the importance of mixed-use and compact development. Housing is the most critical element to this. It's the spark that can shape this downtown vision if properly planned.

Remember the good old days of visiting Eaton's and walking around downtown? By the time you made it back home, you'd have a few miles and a few purchases behind you, as well as the memory of a great walking experience. Our downtown planning needs to combine mixed-use commercial storefronts and housing as the stimulus to get us there.

Creating a walkable downtown encourages movement from shopping, to eating on a patio, to people-watching. It means heading to your downtown loft after a night out, safely walking back to your car in a discreet off-street parkade, or heading back to the suburbs quickly and easily because downtown is connected to rapid transit. It means people can walk from district to district in our downtown without barricades or vast surface parking lots, and enjoy broad, tree-lined sidewalks lined with flowers, banners, murals and sculptures, all surrounded by the buzz of shops, restaurants, and friendly passers-by.

Sidewalks, courtyards, parks and green spaces are required for people to gather. Downtown is the historical capital of our city and preserving its historical building stock is downtown's greatest competitive advantage.

Experience shows people are willing to pay more for homes in planned neighbourhoods like the ones I am describing. More people means more development and vibrancy.

This is why a comprehensive planned approach is needed. We need to recognize that just building more housing isn't enough on its own.

Following this recipe will lead to growth, and not just more development for development's sake. With this growth, the property tax base in the surrounding area will take off to a level never seen before. This type of approach should become mandatory for all of our downtown districts, and government policy and tools should point in this direction.

What gives us hope that the city's housing plan will work is that other critical downtown strategies are also taking shape such as the retail strategy, the downtown parking strategy, an active transportation plan, a new Transit Oriented Development plan. All the pieces are there, but can they now be pulled together?

A comprehensive plan takes more thought and patience, but it's also more viable and has been proven to work. We know politicians are always eager to cut ribbons, but first they need to understand the importance of following a plan and leaving behind not just housing units, but a fully revitalized downtown.

Stefano Grande is the executive director of the Downtown Winnipeg BIZ.

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