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Speaking

WINNIPEG REAL ESTATE BOARD

In April 1999, the Winnipeg Real Estate Board teamed up with the City of Winnipeg to examine and look into issues that were preventing mixed-use development downtown and more residential activity and intensification.

Besides trying to tackle hurdles to downtown development, the task force was looking for “enablers,” or different instruments and changes, that would stimulate new development and refurbishment and adaptive re-use of existing heritage buildings.

A goal of the task force was to create a downtown environment and atmosphere conducive to the development of commercial activity in combination with additional residential housing units whether rental or ownership. It was well understood that a healthy mix of commercial and residential activity brings vibrancy to a downtown — it becomes more than a place for 9-to-5 office workers. A new vitality emerges when you get people living, working, playing and shopping downtown.

Task force members drew on experiences from visiting cities like Montreal and Ottawa but still maintained a realistic approach to what can be achieved in Winnipeg given its local characteristics and slower growth mode.

One of the key points made by the task force in its December 1999 report (available in its entirety on www.wreb.ca under position papers) was to strongly encourage CentreVenture (created in May 1999 by Winnipeg city council to be an arms-length, private sector led corporation to provide leadership in downtown renewal) to act on its recommendations.

Without getting into all of the recommendations, CentreVenture has incorporated most, if not all, of the report's five major recommendations into its *modus operandi* and made progress.

CentreVenture CEO Annitta Stening has met with the board on a number of occasions (even prior to the release of its task force report in 1999), and kept WREB members and officials apprised of the corporation's ongoing activity. In

Board tackles downtown issues

2002, the board's commercial division participated in a workshop with CentreVenture officials who asked for input on issues very similar to the ones raised by the 1999 joint task force.

Where do barriers exist to downtown development? How can we do things better (e.g., streamline development regulations and processes) and facilitate new development?

CentreVenture and city staff met with other key stakeholders as well and came up with a report entitled *Getting Down to Business*. It brings into better focus what needs to be done and clearly validates CentreVenture's role as one that must ensure the private sector has input and is behind public-sector initiatives.

Another example of WREB input with CentreVenture in 2002 was the appointment of a member to serve on a committee to review downtown housing demonstration project applicant proposals. This was in keeping with one of the 1999 task force report's recommendation to encourage and facilitate residential demonstration projects to set an example of the types of developments that are possible (e.g., financially viable with or without incentives).

Funds in the form of forgivable loans were provided to the two successful applicants. As a result, 45 apartment rental units are being constructed at 228 Notre Dame Ave. and 14 condo units have already been sold at 87-89 Princess St. Besides these demonstration projects, another seven condo units are being built at 123 Princess with good possibilities of 12 more condo units at 183 Bannatyne Ave. and 30 rental suites at 230 Princess St.

There is definitely some reason for optimism with the continued excitement and activity around the new Red River College downtown campus on Princess and construction of Waterfront Drive.

Earlier this year, Bill Thiessen of CentreVenture spoke to members of the board's civic and legislative affairs committee members, and in June addressed over 60 commercial division members at a monthly breakfast. He also brought with him Martin Sandhurst, the city's downtown zoning by-law planner, and Curwood Ateah and Wes Petkau of Landmark Planning, planning consultants that are helping in the drafting of the new downtown zoning bylaw.

As a former REALTOR®, Thiessen understands what commercial REALTORS® are seeking in terms of a more simplified, transparent and timely downtown development process. He talked about the city appointing key file managers or trackers that will provide an important customer service component and help expedite development proposals and applications. The entire development process is being streamlined with the collapsing of a number of committees and the forming of a downtown committee.

Parking is another priority with specific need to deal with the shortage of spots around the Red River College campus. The city is moving from one-hour to two-hour parking and looking at creating more pedestrian activity by converting a one-way street to two-ways.

Thiessen indicated housing is a priority for Waterfront Drive. In the downtown as a whole, given existing heritage tax credits and the recent approval of the new Affordable Housing Initiative and the significant funding that goes with it to help spur on affordable housing units downtown, he feels it is a laudable goal for CentreVenture to create 150 new housing units a year.

He is also buoyed by the fact that a new Manitoba Hydro office building is being erected downtown, the True North Entertainment Complex is well underway and a major Museum on the Humanities is in the offing.

Having said all this, Thiessen says downtown housing development is no different than that in suburban — it must be in keeping with the pace of growth in the city and comes in the form of a phased-in approach to ensure new units can be absorbed by the existing demand.

Two other important aspects of the 1999 task force report's concerns include the call for formalization of building code equivalencies by getting an amendment to the Manitoba Building Code and making zoning more permissive in terms of residential use. The province has yet to develop a clear set of building equivalency guidelines like those in Quebec and in Ontario to a lesser extent. It is imperative this happens to make valuable re-use of downtown heritage buildings that require building equivalencies without compromising human safety. By doing so, re-use projects will be more econom-

ically feasible.

With regard to zoning, Martin Sandhurst assured commercial REALTORS® during their monthly gathering that residential land use is a real priority in the new draft zoning bylaw, and that is even reflected in the multiple-use sector which is dominated by office, retail and restaurant use.

There is a downtown-living-sector zone that enhances primarily residential areas but still allows for mixed-use development where commercial use is not incompatible with residential living. The only sector that does not allow residential is the riverbank sector where the priority is use and enjoyment of the public.

He said things need to be made clearer and straightforward answers should be forthcoming when inquiries are made to the city on zoning. A goal is to make the new downtown zoning bylaw not only easy to understand but simple to use.

One potentially contentious inclusion in the draft bylaw is a peer review committee that is to be the arbiter of good urban design. WREB commercial division chair Michael Falk questioned how the committee members could remain totally objective when design can be so subjective.

When does it remain a practical and helpful exercise or, on the other hand, become a frustrating and discouraging step in the development process that can upset a proponent who feels his/her proposal is well designed? What are the design guidelines to follow and what are the expenses that may be incurred including time delays?

In response to these queries, Sandhurst's understanding of the peer review committee was that it will be less concerned about colours and architectural standards and much more focused on how the development connects with the street, downtown pedestrian system and so forth.

The WREB will continue to participate in downtown initiatives, including work with CentreVenture and the City of Winnipeg to ensure the task force report recommendations are implemented.