

Cambridge: The little town that grew

December 3, 2010

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Deep in space, a navigation satellite is peering down on earth and scratching its head in confusion.

Its sophisticated instruments indicate it's looking at its birthplace, a factory in Cambridge, Ont. But its powerful lens feels it is admiring a charming little town in Germany, maybe France, possibly England.

It shouldn't feel bad. Humans down on the ground get that same sense when they arrive in Galt, the small limestone city that forms the heart of the expanded, regional city of Cambridge, 100 kilometres west of Toronto.

The city core has the look and feel of a small European city and that image is going to be enhanced over the next couple of years with a variety of commercial firms proposing downtown rehabilitation projects.

But it's not just businesses that are finding Cambridge attractive. Homebuyers are also making their way west along the 401 corridor from the GTA. House prices are certainly a major draw, but Cambridge's charm also has allure.

House prices in Cambridge are on average 15 per cent below prices in nearby Guelph, says Bob Peace, president of Cambridge Real Estate Board. "Most of the new homes being purchased in the northeast quadrant of Cambridge are bought by people who work in Toronto and Mississauga. A lot of them drive to Milton and jump on the GO Train.

"Next year, there'll be regular GO service to Guelph and Kitchener and I imagine that is going to further stimulate new homes sales in our area," said Peace.

For the greater Kitchener area, which includes Cambridge, the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. measured a 68.3 per cent increase in total housing starts in the first quarter of 2010, compared to the first quarter in 2009.

During that same period, average prices on MLS re-sale homes increased 13.3 per cent to \$284,475.

New home construction in Hespeler — one of three communities amalgamated in 1973 to create Cambridge — triggered the construction of two new interchanges with Highway 401 at Franklin Blvd. and Townline Rd.

Mattamy Homes advertised its Mill Pond project in Hespeler as “the gentle side of Cambridge.”

Hespeler has maintained its original village atmosphere, while Hespeler Rd (Highway 24), leading into central Cambridge from Highway 401, has become the commercial big box corridor for the region.

Galt and Preston were the other two communities married to Hespeler and although they are now officially Cambridge, their names will live on in a 173-year-old flour mill sitting on the edge of the Grand River, which flows majestically through the downtown core.

Leanne Ciancone, of the Landmark Group of Companies, will be applying their names to various dining rooms in her \$6 million refurbishing of the old mill into an upscale restaurant. The Hespeler Room, Preston Room and Galt Room together will accommodate up to 500 diners in the new Cambridge Mill Restaurant scheduled to open in April 2011.

Ciancone and her brothers Aaron and James are the newest generation of the family to get into the restaurant business. Their grandfather, and subsequently their father, operated major restaurants in the Golden Horseshoe. They own the Ancaster Old Mill on Hamilton Mountain and Spencer’s at the Waterfront in Burlington.

Because she’ll be operating the Cambridge Mill restaurant, Ciancone is moving from Burlington to the Waterscape, a new condominium being erected beside the restaurant on the east bank of the Grand.

She’ll be one of the few out-of-towners to purchase a suite there. Developer Paul de Haas says most of his buyers are coming from the large family homes across the river in Galt’s prestigious Victoria Park neighbourhood.

“They didn’t want to leave downtown Galt when they were ready to move out of their large homes, but until we brought The Waterscape to market, there was nowhere in the city for those people to find a new, spacious condominium suite,” says de Haas.

The Waterscape site was for more than half a century one of the most attractive riverfront parcels of land in Waterloo Region, but developers shied away from it due to excessive de-contamination costs.

It was the site of a coal oil production plant early in the last century and had left a nasty heritage. De Haas specializes in converting old industrial sites in city cores to upscale residential projects. He won tax incentives from the province and Cambridge to offset the heavy costs of cleaning the site.

Greg McDonnell, a retired Kitchener firefighter, lives in a large home across the river from downtown Galt and is hoping to move into his Waterscape suite in time for Christmas.

From the high vantage point of his future home, he can watch traffic on the river plus traffic rumbling across the high trestle carrying the main CNR line over the valley.

Watching trains and ships is more than a hobby for this firefighter. He has more than a dozen photography books published about trains, ships and western grain silos.

"I've been up to my unit and when I look through the lens of my camera at Galt's downtown, it's like looking at the centre of a small European city," said McDonnell.

Drayton Entertainment, which operates six theatres for the performing arts in southwestern Ontario, is getting a new theatre and company headquarters in downtown Galt.

With \$6 million each from Ottawa, Queen's Park and the city, the \$18 million theatre will be owned by the city and Drayton Entertainment will lease the office and the theatre support facilities, which includes rehearsal halls, prop and set building, wardrobe creations, etc.

Performances are expected to bring 75,000 people downtown each year.

The University of Waterloo's school of architecture moved into a former riverfront textile mill in the city's core in 2004. Mayor Doug Craig says that creative presence has had a significant influence on the resurgence of restoration projects and new developments downtown.

Cambridge is home to many high-tech research and manufacturing firms, plus a close neighbour to three of Canada's leading universities — Guelph, Waterloo and Wilfred Laurier.

The satellite looking down at Cambridge is one of dozens in space that were designed and built by Com Dev International, a Cambridge high-tech firm. Stephen Hawking, one of the world's best known scientists, signed on this summer to be a professor and researcher at U of Waterloo's Perimeter Institute for Theoretical Physics.

A new rapid transit system is proposed for Waterloo Region to tie Kitchener-Waterloo and Cambridge together, but Greg Durocher, president of the Cambridge Chamber of Commerce, believes it's short-sighted to spend \$800 million to \$1 billion for a regional rapid-transit system.

"I know what their researching at Com Dev and someday we are going to come out our front door, get in our private vehicle, push a button and then sit back to drink coffee and read the *Star* on a screen in the dash, while a computer talking to a satellite directs our car hands-free to our job or shopping or church — wherever we've asked it to go.

"I might not live to see it, but my daughter will," said Durrocher.

MAIN STREET

David Gibson has developed commercial and residential projects all over North America, but rarely has he seen a more attractive small town core than in downtown Galt.

That's why he has spent nearly \$4 million acquiring old buildings on Main St. in Galt's core, which he is now renovating to create a residential/commercial village within the core.

The seven buildings are on both sides of Main Street in the same block between Water St. and Ainsley St.

"We are expecting the municipality to make the streetscape more pedestrian friendly along that block and we're gutting the buildings down to their bare walls to create fresh, new retail outlets and new residences that will be mostly rental," said Gibson.

"We are working closely with the city's heritage committee to maintain the character of the neighbourhood. We love the stone structures along Main St. They create much of the charm of the area and we're hoping the city will be finishing the street surfaces in brick or cobblestone."

In the Perimeter plan, sidewalks will be widened, trees planted and benches installed. "We want to make it an attractive people friendly place," said Gibson. He said two large municipal parking lots behind the buildings fronting on to Main is another of the neighbourhood's attractive features to the developer.

He expects other downtown property owners will be stimulated by his renovations to upgrade their own properties.

Gibson was chairman and one of the founding partners of First Gulf Developments, a firm that specializes in creating office, commercial and industrial properties. First Gulf is a spin off from homebuilder Great Gulf Homes, which became the Great Gulf Group of Companies.

Most notable among Great Gulf's residential projects are 1 Bloor St. and Parkside, a \$200 million waterfront condo on Queen's Quay at Sherbourne St.

Gibson said he sold his shares in First Gulf late last year to launch Perimeter Group and concentrate on redeveloping small commercial/residential properties in the central core of Ontario towns and cities.



GREG MCDONNELL PHOTO

The Grand River makes its way through the Galt portion of Cambridge, which has the feel of an old European village.



PAT BRENNAN PHOTO

The Grand River makes its way through the Galt portion of Cambridge. The 137-year-old mill, soon to be restaurant, is adjacent to the Waterscape condos, which is still under construction along the...



PAT BRENNAN PHOTO

The Grand rGver makes its way through the Galt portion of Cambridge.

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