

# Developer teams with non-profits to build towers serving ‘deepest threshold of affordability’

The Black Creek and Lawrence project will also reserve units for underserved groups, including Black and Indigenous residents, seniors, veterans and newcomers.



By [Donovan Vincent](#) Housing Reporter  
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A strip plaza atop the southeast corner of the busy Black Creek Drive and Lawrence Avenue West intersection serves a large middle- to low-income swath of west-end Toronto in need of housing.

Toronto developer Sherry Larjani says she wants to change that dynamic and is planning to turn the 3.5-acre plaza into a unique project featuring a mix of affordable ownership condos and affordable rentals — mostly the former.

Her proposal, which still requires zoning and site plan approval from the city, has several unique elements.

Larjani, founder and president of Spotlight Development, plans to construct a project — four buildings 18 to 33 storeys, with about 1,470 residential units featuring two-, three- and four-bedrooms — that is completely non-profit.

“We’re going to cross-subsidize anything we make from any portion that is market (units) and bring that back into the project to serve the deepest threshold of affordability,” Larjani said in an interview.

She says she’d like to have as many as 70 per cent of the condo units be affordable, though she adds she can’t make that promise at this early stage in the process.

The units will also target specific groups in the city.

For example, 10 per cent of the residences would be set aside for the Black community, 10 per cent for Indigenous people, along with units catering to others including seniors, veterans, newcomers to Canada and families.

Among the other planned services are programs for youths and seniors and non-profit daycare spots.

(Also planned for the site is about 35,870 square feet of retail. The entire project is expected to cost between \$850 million to \$1 billion to build, depending on construction costs, the developer says.)

Another novel aspect of the project is the fact Larjani is teaming up with several non-profit agencies in the city to deliver the affordable units.

Spotlight has created its own, new non-profit arm and will partner with affordable home ownership organization Habitat for Humanity; non-profit housing provider WoodGreen Community Services; the BlackNorth Initiative, a group offering an array of programs including a home ownership bridge initiative that helps Black people purchase property; and Trillium Housing, which helps would-be homeowners who aren’t as well-off to buy a house.

The developer says she came up with the idea of wanting to provide affordable housing for people in a less privileged part of the city because giving back has always been very close to her heart.

That value was rooted in her by her late father Mohsen while she was growing up in Tehran, her birthplace.

“He used to take me to see orphanages we had in Iran and the families living in areas that were nothing close to what I was living in. We used to take food with us. Having that close relationship with my father and seeing him do that was always something I had in the back of my mind,” she says.

She later arrived with her parents and brother in Canada in 1995 and saw people here who, too, were less well off.

“As I learned more about what it means to live in Canada, I saw a lot of Canadians struggling with the same things as in Iran — housing, food for their children,” Larjani says.

Fast forward to last April. As a fully fledged developer with projects in the city, she was shown the Lawrence and Black Creek site by a trusted business contact.

“This was a great opportunity ... to do something really big with the scale of the property.

“The area is very much underserved. It needs transformation, revitalization. It wasn’t just that it was missing housing, it’s missing amenities,” Larjani says.

She later adds: “I saw the opportunity to help people with low and moderate incomes. The area is 50 to 60 per cent occupied by rental buildings and renters. I saw the opportunity to do something that will make a difference.”

In a statement, Dahabo Ahmed-Omer, executive director of the BlackNorth Initiative, said the organization is excited to be part of a new development that prioritizes home ownership for a diverse group of Canadians at such a large scale.

“It will allow us to provide over 100 homes to Black Canadians who long deserve this opportunity,” she goes on to say.

According to a recent report from Oxford Economics released by Mortgage Professionals Canada, Ontario home prices are 22.5 times the average disposable income.

That's impossible for the Black community, especially when you think about the fact that the average annual household income for a Black family is \$49,000 a year, Ahmed-Omer said in an interview.

A good portion of the money BlackNorth will bring to the table for the Black Creek and Lawrence development will come through fundraising, she adds.

"We believe at BlackNorth that the solution to affordable home ownership should be on the shoulders of all sectors — whether it be all levels of government, philanthropists, charitable foundations, non-profits, private corporations. Everyone is part of the solution," she adds.

Mwarigha M.S, vice-president of housing, homelessness services, asset sustainability and development for WoodGreen, said his organization has a strategic goal to build an additional 2,000 units of housing over the next 10 years in the city.

"So, we're always out there looking for opportunities to partner," he says. WoodGreen will be a partner developer for the affordable rental units at Lawrence and Black Creek — around 200 in all.

WoodGreen will bring its own equity and resources to the table, including money from its foundation, city funding and incentives, seed money provided by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. (CMHC) and take out its own long-term mortgage, he explains.

"This is a critical project for us. Being part of an inclusionary housing development (with a) specific focus on moderate and low-income communities."

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