

CURRENT ISSUE

SOCIAL RESPONSIBLE REDEVELOPER TO TRANSFORM OLD SHOPPING CENTER AND PARKING LOT INTO AN AFFORDABLE, INCLUSIVE NEW NEIGHBORHOOD



In conversations about the world's most diverse, inclusive cities, **Toronto, Ontario, Canada** is always one of the first to be mentioned. But one would hardly suspect that, based on the American-style residential developments that have typified the past decade or so. They have largely ignored both affordable and workforce housing needs.

A delightful exception to that pattern occurred on April 14, 2022, when **Spotlight Development** announced that it is planning to redevelop an old parking lot and defunct shopping center in the **Black Creek** and **Lawrence** neighborhoods of **Toronto, Ontario, Canada**.

The 3.5-acre site will be revitalized into a new mixed-use community that provides much-needed affordable housing with supporting retail, childcare, and other community amenities to this underserved area of the city.



Replacing this shopping plaza and parking lot at the intersection of Lawrence Avenue West and Black Creek Drive, the redevelopment team envisions a remarkably progressive, and inclusive model and has invited a series of not-for-profit agencies to partner on the project.

On the housing side, this includes **Habitat for Humanity**, **WoodGreen Community Services**, **The BlackNorth Initiative**, and **Trillium Housing**.

At present, the developer is proposing approximately 1470 residential units. Part of the project aims to provide housing for families with low to moderate incomes that fall below \$75,000 annually.

With the goal of providing as much affordable housing as possible, for both rental and ownership, this vision is a stark difference to what is typically offered in the housing development sector across the city.

The vision includes the following targets:

- 10 per cent dedicated to housing for Black Canadians;
- 10 per cent to Indigenous Canadians;
- 10 per cent to Habitat for Humanity;
- 10 per cent to Trillium Housing;
- 15 per cent to WoodGreen Community Services; and
- 45 per cent will be serving all communities, including a portion dedicated to housing for veterans, through Spotlight Affordable Ventures.



Larjani with non-for-profit partners in front of the project site. (Joel Gale, Eye Shoot Images).

Spotlight Development Founder and President **Sherry Larjani** is spearheading the project and development of this new model through a new non-profit arm of the company, **Spotlight Affordable Ventures**.

Along with prioritizing marginalized Canadians, the partners involved will ensure that seniors, newcomers, and families will have access to affordable family-size housing units with two, three, and four-bedroom units. This community will also be designed to help residents succeed as homeowners and renters.

The involvement of not-for-profit partners will ensure a range of community benefits and service opportunities, including access to youth programming, food services, clothing and grooming services, childcare, employment and financial services, and senior services, resulting in a healthy, supportive and sustainable neighbourhood.

“Our proposal at Black Creek and Lawrence prioritizes affordable housing in a neighbourhood that has lower than average incomes in the City of Toronto, and where 56 per cent of residents live in rental apartments. In addition, our proposal puts forward a complete

community context while bringing a revolutionary new model that can support affordable home ownership and rental at a much larger scale than traditional models,” says Larjani.

“Through this development, we are prioritizing inclusivity and diversity that can be sustainable for the long term. The partners we are engaging for this project will not only help bring this vision to life but also allow us to connect authentically with Torontonians who are most excluded from Toronto’s housing market,” she added.



Working with **Sweeney + Co Architects**, the proposed design for this new mixed-use community includes four mixed-use towers with approximately 35,866 sq. ft. for essential retail and approximately 36,959 sq. ft. of outdoor community amenities, including a non-profit daycare and outdoor amenity space with patio seating and community gardens.

Not-for-profit partners will have access to a large proportion of units to offer to community members they support through their services. These partners were selected intentionally and thoughtfully, recognizing that communities like Black and Indigenous Canadians have historically been marginalized and face unique roadblocks to home-ownership, an accomplishment that significantly impacts social determinants of health and transformational generational change.

“We are excited to be part of this new development that prioritizes homeownership for a diverse group of Canadians at such a substantial scale. It will allow us to provide over 100 homes to Black Canadians who long deserve this opportunity. The dream of home ownership is more than a home – it’s dignity, integrity, belonging and success. We are so energized by this new partnership and the shift in thinking it represents in housing development sector,” says **Dahabo Ahmed-Omer**, Executive Director, The Black North Initiative.

“The vision for the new affordable housing development at Lawrence and Black Creek is bold, courageous, and generous,” says **Ene Underwood**, CEO, Habitat for Humanity, GTA. *“Over the last two years, affordability has gotten further away from Canadians seeking to purchase a home. Through this new partnership, we can help more families lay down roots, experience*

the stability of owning their own homes, and transition from making rent payments to building equity.”

“The Lawrence and Black Creek neighbourhood has been historically underserved,” says **Mwarigha**, Vice-President, WoodGreen Community Services.



“We are looking forward to this collaborative partnership to build a complete community that includes wrap-around support services for residents, such as a daycare, youth services, employment services, and senior services. It’s an exciting project to be part of because it demonstrates how we can bring affordable housing to a neighbourhood that does not does not attract such large scale and transformational affordable housing developments,” he continued.

A passion project for Larjani, Spotlight Ventures for Affordable Housing will continue to prioritize affordable housing options and purpose-built rental opportunities in future projects.

Through this new non-profit, Larjani is also exploring innovative financing models where lower income community members can receive down payment support, loans, and shared appreciation mortgages. Fundraising events and donor campaigns will be planned as well, with the option for Torontonians to participate directly in initiatives like ‘Sponsor a Family’ for their first home purchase.

“We are taking best practices from all the financial sources available and connecting with trusted non-profits who are doing important work in their communities, so we can build a holistic model that incorporates many progressive elements. More than housing, it is equally important for the development team to ensure the community is sustainable enabling residents and families to build equity and have the services they need to stay long-term. To do this, we’re incorporating employment opportunities on-site as well as childcare amenities. This

is a model we intend to repeat in other sites and are open to collaborate with partners that share an interest in building a truly inclusive community,” says Larjani.

The 3.5-acre site is located at 1635 Lawrence Avenue West. A site plan application is expected to be submitted to the City of Toronto at the end of the month.

Featured photo by Joel Gale, Eye Shoot Images shows (from left to right): Dahabo Ahmed-Omer (The BlackNorth Initiative); Mwarigha (WoodGreen Community Services); Sherry Larjani (Spotlight Development); Shelton Mpala (The BlackNorth Initiative); and Ene Underwood (Habitat for Humanity GTA). All other photos courtesy of Spotlight Development, Inc.