

SPOTLIGHT ON AFFORDABILITY

Matt Durnan

A proposed mixed-use development in the Black Creek and Lawrence neighbourhood would transform a property currently containing a strip mall plaza into a vibrant tower community, offering market and affordable housing units for rent and ownership, along with a range of community services.

Spotlight Development is seeking a re-zoning of a 3.5-acre plot of land, located at 1635 Lawrence Avenue West, to change the site, currently zoned commercial, to mixed-use. The existing plaza would be demolished and the proposed development would add to the site four residential towers between 18 and 33 storeys in height containing 1,470 new residential units atop podiums that would accommodate a daycare, retail space, health care and

employment services. Early site plans also include a row of stacked townhomes.

Spotlight has been working in partnership with **Habitat for Humanity**, **Trillium Housing**, **The BlackNorth Initiative** and **WoodGreen Community Services** to establish a site plan and housing distribution that would flip the traditional model of a 70:30 split between market and affordable housing and would apply an inverse ratio closer to a 30:70 split, with affordable housing comprising the majority of units on the site.

“As a developer I’m always looking for property and I was familiar with the area, but had never really paid as much attention to it as I did when it became available,” Spotlight Development president **Sherry Larjani** told *NRU*.

“What was striking to me

was how much in need of revitalization this whole area is. I decided that I was going to purchase it and was going to make something more innovative out of this project than other projects that I have going around the city.”

Working with **Sweeny&Co Architects**, the proposed design for this new mixed-use community includes four mixed-use towers to accommodate the residential units and approximately 35,866 square feet for essential retail and approximately 36,959 square feet of outdoor community amenities, including a non-profit daycare and outdoor amenity space with patio seating and community gardens.

Additionally, the proposal earmarks up to 15 per cent of the residences to be dedicated

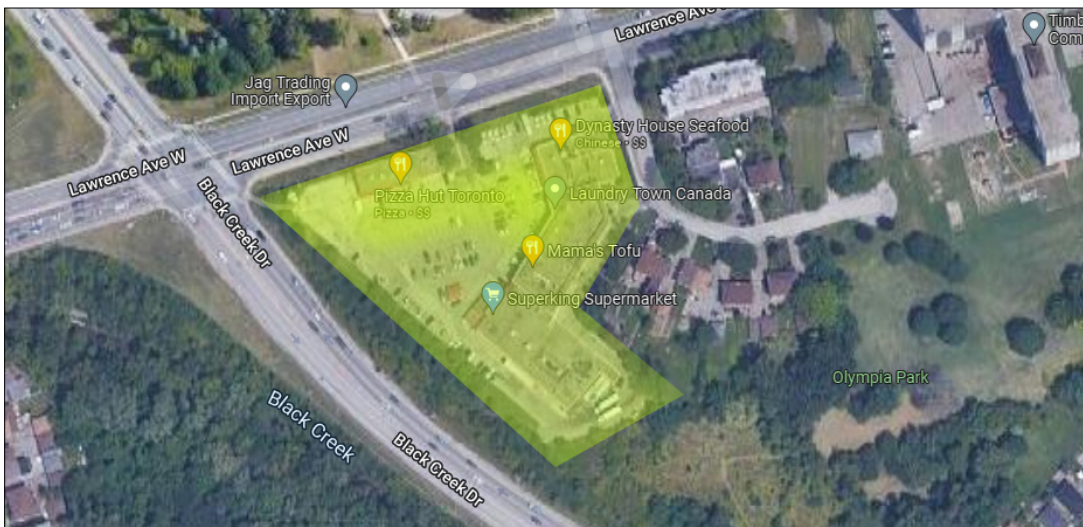
as affordable rental units to be managed by WoodGreen Community Services.

“The project will be the largest affordable housing development in the neighbourhood, in a place where not many developers build to that scale today,” WoodGreen vice-president of housing, homelessness and development **Mwarigha** told *NRU*.

“The market generally says that for this scale of development you need to have 70 per cent market housing and 30 per cent affordable; that’s the model that we’ve generally used as a policy tool. This particular one reverses that.”

The vision for this project also includes targets that 10 per cent of the affordable housing units be dedicated to housing Black Canadians, 10 per cent to

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Aerial photograph showing the location of Spotlight Development's proposed mixed-use tower development at the corner of Black Creek Drive and Lawrence Avenue West. The existing strip plaza on the site would be demolished four residential towers between 18 and 33 storeys in height containing 1,470 new residential units atop podiums that would accommodate a daycare, retail space, health care and employment services. Early site plans also include a row of stacked townhomes.

SOURCE: SPOTLIGHT DEVELOPMENT VIA KGS&A

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Indigenous Canadians, 10 per cent to Habitat for Humanity, 10 per cent to Trillium Housing, 15 per cent to WoodGreen, with 45 per cent to serve members of all communities, including a portion dedicated to housing for veterans, through Spotlight Affordable Ventures.

“We’ve spent the past year working on finessing a model that will allow us to provide more affordable housing than has ever been done before in any project,” said Larjani.

“My personal goal for this project is to reach 70 per cent [affordable housing] and cross-using the 30 per cent that’s being sold to market to subsidize it, and be able to cater to families that are within the deepest threshold of affordability.”

More than just providing affordable housing to the area, the site plan looks to create an entire community hub, with the four towers constructed atop podia that will house an array of retail and service options for residents.

“There will be all sorts of community amenities that WoodGreen is known for, including community health services, employment services and in that way, this becomes a significant source of empowerment and opportunity for people in that neighbourhood,” said Mwarigha.

“That’s why we’re attracted to this partnership, and also it’s a partnership that’s in a neighbourhood that will get very little traction through inclusive zoning policies of the city, primarily because those areas are where the land value for investment are generally considered of low potential.”

The proposal is something of a passion project for Larjani, who says that she has already started the conversation with the business owners who are currently working at the retail locations in the strip mall in hopes of accommodating them in the future.

“Our goal is not to take their livelihoods away, we want to make sure that we allow them

the chance to come back and participate in this new project and to work with them as much as we can,” said Larjani.

“This does happen in many locations in order to create more intensification as we know; older plazas are turning into different and newer projects, but the retail component is still going to be an important part of our project. We’re still going to have a grocery store, medical services, a daycare, and we’re focusing on creating more retail in this location as well.”

Flipping the conventional makeup of 70 per cent market housing on its head is something that Mwarigha is very excited to see, and he believes it could be transformative to the way that communities are planned in the future.

“If it succeeds, it will be an important game changer about how we look at the viability of affordable housing in this city,” said Mwarigha, touching on the

importance of having housing dedicated to minority groups.

“Close to 70 per cent of Canadian wealth is generated through home ownership. A significant number of people...Indigenous, people of colour, members of the Black community, have been shut out from that opportunity of wealth building and this project will go a long way in fulfilling some of these outcomes for families, as well as improving the overall picture of equity in our housing development market.”

It’s still early days for the project and Larjani is in the final steps of working through the site plan and zoning by-law amendment submissions that she expects to have submitted to the city by the end of the month.

“Obviously a lot depends on planning staff and the city,” said Larjani.

“It’s hard to put a timeline on this, but the whole goal would be that within two-and-a-half years from now, we’ll be getting ready for construction. We’re going to start to do some community outreach in the area so that we can start the conversation and introduce the project to the neighbourhood.”



Spotlight Development’s preliminary site plan for 1635 Lawrence Ave W. features four towers which will house a combined 1,470 residential units, including a significant proportion of affordable ownership and rental units. Final numbers are to be confirmed, but the early target is to have a split of 70 per cent affordable housing units, to be subsidized by the sale of the 30 per cent market housing units.

ARCHITECT: SWEENY&CO ARCHITECTS
SOURCE: SPOTLIGHT DEVELOPMENT VIA K&A

