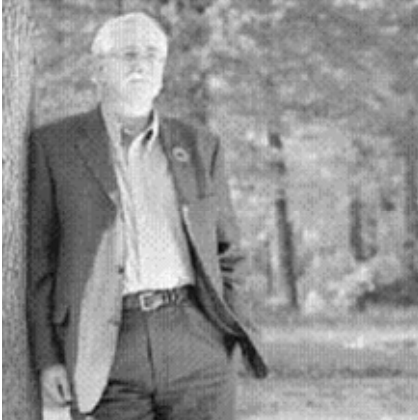


Rockcliffe Landing: Dreaming of a model community on a former air base
The 'amazing' location has the potential to become one of Canada's smartest developments. But doing it right, experts warn, will require vision, technology and the best minds in the business, writes Maria Cook.

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CREDIT: Julie Oliver, the Ottawa Citizen Jim Lynes CEO of the Canada Lands Company, says the new district could become a showcase of environmentally sustainable design and construction. 'We have decided to step it up a notch,' he says.

Behind the Dairy Queen on St. Laurent Boulevard, Canadian Forces Base Rockcliffe stretches eastward: 336 acres of fields, woods and remnants of military domesticity. A bluff gives broad views over the Ottawa River to the Gatineau Hills.

Until recently, the former air force base was active, with the autonomy typical of communities built for the Armed Forces. Now considered surplus, it has become prime development land, only 5.5 kilometres east of Parliament Hill and twice the size of LeBreton Flats.

The Canadian War Museum was originally slated for the site, but now a new Museum of Science and Technology is being considered. However, most development being proposed is for housing.

"Most people don't know it," says Yvan Cazabon, a Carleton University architecture professor. "The siting is amazing. The views are great. Beautiful light comes in there. Nothing obstructs anything. The natural landscape is the bonus feature. You have to use your imagination to see the potential."

Canada Lands Company (CLC), a Crown corporation that sells surplus federal lands to the private sector, is discussing a community of between 10,000 and 15,000 people. By comparison, LeBreton Flats will be home to 5,000.

CLC will encourage "smart growth," with a focus on sustainability, intensification and a design style known as New Urbanism. This means higher residential densities and neighbourhood retail: multi-storey apartments and shops on a main street, as in Centretown or Westboro.

John Godfrey, federal minister of infrastructure and communities, sees the Rockcliffe air base land as a rare opportunity to learn from the mistakes of suburbia, and to create a model community for 21st century urban life.

"This is hugely important," says Mr. Godfrey, who is also minister responsible for the CLC. "It should be the most sustainable, smartest, best-connected community in the country."

A six-day Citizen series, beginning today, surveys what's at stake at CFB Rockcliffe. Do CLC officials have the skill, spirit and imagination to transform the air base land into something special? Can they usher in a new era of city-making and instil pride in Canadian know-how?

Or will Rockcliffe become little more than a new and improved suburb, conceived by formula, compromise and timidity? (CLC planners don't have far to look for an example: The early-stage development of LeBreton Flats has already been criticized for having failed to fulfil its potential.)

Around the world, architects, planners and communities are revitalizing former industrial sites and derelict parts of downtown. By concentrating population growth in denser neighbourhoods, cities such as Ottawa hope to ease the mounting pressures of costly new subdivisions, gas-guzzling commutes and loss of open space.

But smart growth has its risks: Skeptics say it threatens to damage established and successful neighbourhoods by increasing density, height, bulk and the number of cars that come with "intensification."

"It does behoove us to take our time and do the right thing here," says Jacques Legendre, Ottawa councillor for Rideau-Rockcliffe Ward. "It's such a large chunk of land and a beautiful site. We want to do the best thing possible with it."

CLC's concept plan for Rockcliffe consists of between 4,500 and 6,000 residences, ranging from single-family houses and townhouses to six-storey apartment buildings. A town park is at the centre of the plan, while a main commercial street would be lined with shops and restaurants at ground level, with apartments and offices above.

Tentatively dubbed "Rockcliffe Landing," the new community would be designed with pocket parks, pedestrian and cycling paths, and space for a federal museum. Entrances to the district would be marked by taller "gateway buildings."

"We try to balance community need with financial return," says Paul Page, CLC general manager of real estate for the national capital region. "We are bottom-line oriented. We are there to make money."

CLC embraces New Urbanism, an urban design movement that promotes pedestrian-oriented, mixed-use neighbourhoods with narrow lots, tightly knit streets and a neo-traditional architecture of porches and pitched roofs.

New Urbanism began in the early 1980s with Seaside, a successful new development in Florida. Recently, in Mississippi, the governor asked high-profile New Urbanists for plans to rebuild the Katrina-ravaged Gulf Coast.

Yet, in Ottawa, new developments, whether in Barrhaven, Orleans or Kanata, show people to be building and buying the suburban life. While 72 per cent of Ottawans live in suburbs (subdivisions built after the Second World War), only 18 per cent inhabit the urban core. The other 10 per cent live in rural areas.

Is the effort of CLC to alter this pattern necessary and enlightened? Is the selling of a major public asset for housing clearly justified? Could there be another use or should it lay fallow until a convincing need arises?

Consider the National Capital Commission's transfer of the Daly site at Rideau and Wellington streets to a private developer. Was the construction of luxury condos for a small number of wealthy people the best possible use of exceptional public property?

Examples of wasted opportunities abound.

Downtown parking lots that could have furthered an agenda of elegant urbanity have instead sprouted suburban "townhouses" and high-rise buildings.

The land beside the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) at Montreal Road and Aviation Parkway was a forest and unusual ecosystem that evolved just minutes from downtown. A few years ago, it was redeveloped as if it was a field on the outskirts of the city.

(CLC, which took over the land from CMHC and sold it to a developer, takes no responsibility for the result, saying that CMHC developed the plan.)

Ottawa-Vanier MP Mauril Belanger, a resident of the abutting Fairhaven community, is the biggest critic of the Rockcliffe project. He has said that the land should remain in federal hands and be used for federal institutions such as museums.

Mr. Belanger refused comment for this series, claiming that as associate minister of defence he has a conflict of interest. Nevertheless, he is working behind the scenes to influence the project's outcome.

The base occupies a commanding position on high ground that offers views of Parliament Hill and panoramas of the Ottawa River, Kettle Island and the Gatineau Hills beyond. The Peace Tower is visible from the entrance at Hemlock Road.

On the north, the site drops about 30 metres to the Rockcliffe Parkway. Beyond the parkway is the Canada Aviation Museum. The Aviation Parkway defines the western boundary of the base. Abutting CFB Rockcliffe on the east is the main campus and headquarters of the National Research Council. To the south lies Montreal Road, Montfort Hospital, the national office of the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation, and La Cite collegiale, a French-language applied arts and technology college. The Montfort Woods to the north of the hospital abut CFB Rockcliffe.

To a large extent, CFB Rockcliffe is surrounded by residential communities: Rothwell Heights to the east, Fairhaven and Thorncliffe Village to the south, and Manor Park, Rockcliffe Park and Vanier to the west.

Yet it is a strangely disconnected enclave, well-suited to its military vocation. "It's the ultimate gated community," says Mr. Cazabon. As such, connecting it in the grid and grain of the city remains a challenge.

The need for excellent transit is fundamental -- especially in terms of potential traffic impact on surrounding communities -- but traffic and transportation are among the weakest aspects of the CLC plan.

CLC planners are tying the success of the project, in large part, to the hope that a light rail line will be built on Montreal Road -- an expensive piece of infrastructure that experts say will likely not happen in the next 15 years.

But Mr. Page says the CLC is hoping that the air base development will pressure the city to speed up the light-rail plan. Light rail "would definitely enhance the sustainability of the project," he says. "One of our big objectives is to use public transport and leave the car at home.

"You can't be dumping 2,000 vehicles down Hemlock," says Mr. Page. "Access onto the parkways is not easy at this point. They're not supposed to be major commuter routes anyway. There's no point in trying to bump things down to the Queensway because the Queensway just can't take any more traffic."

Until light rail becomes a reality, though, the project would rely on bus service, Mr. Page says. Does this fit with the overall plan for a quaint, sustainable, urban village?

CLC officials sitting in their boardroom on the base appear unhappy at the question. "If it's possible to build some other kind of solution, that would be good," offers Jim Lynes, acting president and CEO.

Then there's the matter of density, which is related to traffic. Mr. Page says the City of Ottawa favours a higher density (6,000 housing units) over the 4,500 on which the preliminary CLC plan is based.

"The mayor is very keen on the fact that adding thousands of residents is enabling the transit by providing new customers," says Mr. Page.

(Mayor Bob Chiarelli refused to comment on the development project, as did Ottawa-Vanier MPP Madeleine Meilleur.)

"It's in our backyard," says Patrick O'Keefe, president of the Manor Park Community Association. "We realize it's going to have a huge impact on us.

"We hope that we can be involved in the consultative process. It could be very nice to have a mixed-use neighbourhood next door. But we will still have to live with all the traffic that will flood our streets."

The redevelopment of Rockcliffe raises other issues, including quality of design and construction, the selection process for architects and contractors, sale of public land to developers, and community consultation.

Residents are interested in preservation of sight lines to the Ottawa River, protection of the adjacent Montfort Woods, and preservation of the Rockcliffe Parkway as a limited-access scenic route rather than a commuter highway.

While design flair is driving some of the most interesting new projects in Europe and the United States, architecture appears to be a lower priority for CLC.

"One of the challenges CLC faces is that it does not have, within its coterie of senior employees, anybody with a design background," says Yves Gosselin, president of the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada.

"It's a bit ironic. They wish to explore fairly cutting-edge concepts of urbanism. On the other hand, they want to stay with a very safe architectural vocabulary.

"It's like saying 'I'm going to design the fastest car in the world but I'm going to dress it like a model T.'"

Faced with a stalled project and lack of political will, CLC officials have recently reshaped the plan to add excitement.

They propose that the new district could become a showcase of environmentally sustainable design and construction, and a hub for research institutions and spinoff companies. "We have decided to step it up a notch," says Mr. Lynes.

The project could demonstrate energy-saving technology developed by two neighbouring federal agencies, the National Research Council and the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation.

"This could be a sandbox, an opportunity to demonstrate the technology and research," says Mr. Lynes. "It could become a focus for something that is missing in Ottawa. There isn't anything for sustainable development research."

Mr. Godfrey likes it. "I was excited about the first plan," he says. "Then I got really excited when they began talking about putting the plan on steroids, in terms of sustainability."

"My ambition for CLC is that they be seen as the premier developer of sustainable, livable, new urbanism communities in the country -- that they show the way to private developers."

CLC has overseen development of several former military bases across Canada, including CFB Calgary, which they regard as a model for Rockcliffe. But Ottawa is not Calgary.

"If under the rubric of New Urbanism we make everything neo-traditional, how do we distinguish between Ottawa and Calgary?" says Mr. Gosselin.

"Is this not simply repeating the error of placelessness, endemic in North American suburban development since the '60s? There is no there there."

Trevor Boddy, a former Carleton University architecture professor who now writes on architecture and urbanism in Vancouver, agrees.

"I worry they're stuck with a template," says Mr. Boddy. "I would worry that a more interesting and original investigation won't be done and there's this cookie-cutter scheme. Public benefit and the best return to taxpayers will occur with innovation, not with templates."

Meanwhile, a potential dispute over ownership of the air base land could affect CLC plans. The Algonquin First Nation of Pikwakanagan (formerly Golden Lake) say the base is part of their Ottawa-area land claim.

Chief Kirby Whiteduck says his band has expressed interest to the federal government and to Canada Lands Company in managing or owning a quarter of the site.

"We might be interested in housing for Algonquin people living and working in Ottawa," he says. "We want to be consulted. We still want to be involved."

But the Department of National Defence said it considers the matter closed. Spokesman Doug Drever said DND and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs consulted with the Algonquins of Eastern Ontario regarding Rockcliffe between 1998 and 2002.

"As a result of these consultations, DND was advised by (Indian Affairs) that it would not be acquiring lands in settlement of the First Nations comprehensive land claim," said Mr. Drever.

"The department is therefore proceeding with its request for government authority to proceed with the sale of these surplus lands to Canada Lands Company and to Heritage Canada for use by the National Capital Commission."

Established by the defence department in 1898, CFB Rockcliffe has a long and honourable history. It has served as an air force base, birthplace of Canadian aerial photography, and idyllic village for military families.

In 1996, the federal government decided the base had outlived its purpose. Since then, CLC has been negotiating a transfer with DND, offering \$27 million. Treasury Board approved the sale on Monday.

About 449 houses, known as private married quarters (PMQs) are dotted around the base, housing about 400 military people in total. Another 75 people rent 19 of the houses from the Gloucester Non-Profit Housing Corporation; the city says it will move these people into other affordable housing properties as they become available.

The project would take 10 to 15 years to complete and is expected to stimulate about \$1 billion in private-sector investment.

Tony Keith, president of the Rockcliffe Park Residents Association, called the air base "one of the great pieces of real estate yet to be developed in the urban core.

"It would be just wonderful if it was done brilliantly rather than building more pedestrian tract housing."

Lessons Learned

Style Weekly Homes looks at the ideas and technology behind developing an environmentally sustainable community. See Section J in today's paper.

The Series

Tomorrow: From apple orchard to air base: a historical look at CFB Rockcliffe.

Monday: The genesis of Canada Lands Company's plan for developing the base, and what it will take to implement it.

Tuesday: Why it took 10 years to approve the transfer of air base land to the Canada Lands Company.

Wednesday: Learning lessons from the CLC's previous projects.

Thursday: Development plans raise fears of traffic gridlock in surrounding neighbourhoods.

End