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Television City
Supplied photo
An artist's rendering of the proposed condos at the current CHCH building on Jackson St. W.

A Toronto condo developer is setting his eyes on Hamilton, starting with a 40- and 30-storey twin condo tower proposal on the CHCH TV site with prices ranging from \$200,000 to \$1 million.

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Developer Brad Lamb's \$360-million plan for 163 Jackson St. W. has 618 condos in two glass high-rises attached only by a large second-floor terrace. CHCH sold the property last October and is looking for a new location.

"We've designed a building that I think is going to make a big noise architecturally in the city," Lamb told a Spectator editorial board meeting where he presented his proposal — which he has not yet submitted to the city.

The style is reminiscent of the tall skinny condo high-rises on either side of the Gardiner Expressway in downtown Toronto.

Among his reasons for moving into the Hamilton market is the provincial plan to eliminate the Ontario Municipal Board, which in his view, puts "all the power into the hands of the ratepayers" and results in Toronto building sites being "sterilized."

"I am absolutely not buying anything more in the City of Toronto ... We're focusing on the other cities, and Hamilton is going to benefit from that."

Lamb has purchased two other Hamilton properties for condo developments — one on a current car wash site on Main Street West, between the Dundurn Fortinos plaza and Locke Street, for 400 units, and the other on Queen Street North. He did not say how many units are planned for the Queen Street site.

Lamb Development Corp. has developed condo projects mostly in Toronto, but also in Edmonton, Calgary and Ottawa.

Other reasons for choosing Hamilton include the city's pro-development stance, its renaissance and its growing reputation as a vibrant city.

"We're the first off the ground to do something of this cost and style (in Hamilton)," he said.

Lamb expects to submit his rezoning application in 30 to 45 days. (The CHCH studio and attached heritage home were sold last year to Lamb and Hamilton's Aaron Collina of Movengo Developments, who are partnering on the condo project under Television City Inc. The station is now leasing the building from them.)

The current zoning permits medium-density residential such as stacked townhouses and low- or mid-rise apartment buildings topping at four storeys, although it will be 11 storeys under new zoning soon.

Despite not filing for rezoning yet, Lamb has started a sophisticated public relations campaign with glossy brochures to hype the project, which is called Television City.

"We've done a lot of premarketing things in Toronto among our clients and there's a huge number of people interested in Hamilton," he said.

His company has had preliminary meetings with the Durand Neighbourhood Association's board of directors, ward councillor Jason Farr and top city planning staff.

Lamb said he would like to get a shovel in the ground in about a year and a half. His promotional material says condos will start selling in mid-to-late September this year.

He expects that empty-nesters, young couples and McMaster and Mohawk students will live in the condos. Many parents buy condos for their student children and then when graduated, provide a place for them, he said.

The units will start at 400 square feet for a bachelor up to 2,000 square feet for a penthouse.

"This is really middle-class housing ... (although) there might be some people considered wealthy who might live here."

Lamb acknowledges the 40 storeys is a problem for some and points out he already decreased his initial idea of

Even at 40 storeys, the one tower could become Hamilton's highest building because Lamb's plan has nine-foot ceilings on each floor instead of the standard eight feet — making it higher than a normal 40- storey building.

The highest now is the 43-storey residential Landmark Place at 100 Main St. E., which was built in 1974, the city says.

Says Lamb: "The idea is we wanted to be the tallest building in the city because we want it to be a signature building.

"I think tall buildings enhance a city," he added while recognizing that as a builder, he also stands to gain from them.

Still, there is an illogical fear "in my mind" about high-rises, Lamb said.

"Forty storeys is not going to be easy in this city, but we're working toward a rationale on why it makes sense.

"We believe this is very appropriate, but we have to convince ratepayers, mayors, councillors, planners."

Ward 2 councillor Jason Farr says without a rezoning application, it's still early days in the plan, despite Lamb's "very good job of promoting and marketing" with "a lot of flash, pizzazz and media attention."

It's why Farr is reserving his opinion until the proposal goes through the planning process.

But he points out the city policy doesn't allow lower city high-rises to be built higher than the top of the escarpment; Lamb is starting off with a higher ground elevation than most.

Farr expressed doubt the project would proceed as proposed, saying Lamb's attempt to create a buzz is "a similar technique used by (condo developer) Harry Stinson, one of Lamb's early partners."

Stinson came from Toronto with a showy hotel/condo/office redevelopment in 2008 at the former historic Connaught Hotel — plus a 100-storey glass pyramid next door — but it failed when he couldn't get financing.

"He (Stinson) was going to build these colossal towers ... There was a huge media blitz and it never happened," Farr said.

Durand association president Frances Murray, shown Lamb's promotional brochure, also pointed out the site's higher-than-normal elevation, noting "he's talking about very dominating structures on top of that."

Her association is opposed to Lamb's plans because of the height, design, mass and extra generated traffic that would come with the project. She noted, as did Farr, that the Durand neighbourhood is already the most densely populated in the city.

"We wish developers would build on the empty parking lots downtown that are already available ..."

There has been little association discussion so far on Lamb's plan because the group is busy fighting another high-rise plan in Durand. Medallion Properties Inc. wants to build at the current site of a cluster of low-rise buildings on Duke Street. The association opposes the plan due to its height and the demolitions required to build.

Murray said "anybody can throw together a brochure" but nothing can happen with Lamb's plan without rezoning. "That's a key piece ... it's not even a proposal yet. It's their idea."

Lamb vows to see the project through. "We'll arm wrestle with people and we'll see what we end up with, but we're building something here. We're not going to cancel it."

Chief city planner Steve Robichaud agrees height is the issue.

"At this time, I haven't seen anything to change that."

But there are caveats, he said.

"We do recognize there's a heritage building on that site and that the developer is also proposing some additional green space (for public use.)"

"But we still have to be satisfied it's good planning," Robichaud added.

Lamb, asked about his reported comment that Hamilton will become a bedroom community for Toronto, responded that he's an outspoken person and sometimes says flamboyant things.

He told The Spectator some people may now see Hamilton as a viable commute to Toronto with GO train service.

Lamb added, however, he thinks the large majority of people moving here from Toronto will want to look for jobs here to be closer to home.

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