

CITY

Ashcroft Homes has lofty plans for Central Park

Feedback on 18-storey-plus condo towers positive, developer says

BY JOANNE CHIANELLO

Ashcroft Homes is planning a new 930,000 square-foot project on the Merivale Road side of its Central Park housing development by the Experimental Farm, complete with eight mixed-used buildings — four of them 18-storey-plus condo towers.

That's well above the eight-storey height currently allowed in the area so, as in virtually every other intensification project in the city, Ashcroft will be asking for that section of Merivale to be rezoned when it files its preliminary plans with the city in a few weeks. But what makes this higher-than-called-for project different from others

is that the community supports it — at least so far, and with caveats.

"I think overall the feedback was really positive," said Liz Allan, president of the Central Park Community Association, of a meeting that Ashcroft held last month with about 75 members of the surrounding neighbourhood.

The early thumbs-up from the community, which is 1,300 households strong, is a surprise on two fronts: residents are rarely happy with developers who want more height than the current zoning allows; and Ashcroft in particular doesn't have a spotless record with homeowners in the Central Park housing

development. Central Park was plagued with construction-quality and safety issues early in the decade. Indeed, the developer was compelled by the city to re-inspect many homes in the area. And Ashcroft is the developer behind the hugely controversial convent redevelopment in Westboro.

The community's collective change of heart seems to be coming from the actual design for the new development. Instead of putting up a row of squat, square buildings — which Ashcroft is allowed to do under the city's current zoning — the developer is working with well-known Ottawa architect Ritchard Brisbin for the first time to create something of a walkable main street for the residents of Central Park that would include small gardens, street-level shops and park-

ing. On the way out is the drive-thru Tim Hortons on Merivale, which many residents have complained causes traffic backups during morning rush hour. (Ashcroft officials said a Tim Hortons could be part of the commercial mix of the new development, but a drive-thru will not be allowed.)

"The concept (Ashcroft) is putting forward is not something we're really used to seeing," said Allan. "I expected to see a straight line of squat buildings, that would have really been a barrier to our community. Instead, the design seems innovative. There's even what you might call an organic flow to it."

Creating a main street feel for that part of Merivale, just north of Baseline Road, wasn't easy, accord to Brisbin, who is also one of the architects working on the de-

velopment of Lansdowne Park.

While the Central Park housing community sits on the west side of Merivale, the Experimental Farm is on the east side. "Frankly, it's hard to create a main street when you don't have both sides of the road in play," said Brisbane.

Instead of using Merivale as the main road in the new development, Brisbin has treated it as the back of the community. He's proposing a serpentine new "main street" running alongside Merivale, with parking and buildings on both sides. There would be greenery and some commercial uses between the new main street and Merivale, but mostly the gap would serve as a barrier between the housing development and the heavily used artery.

Currently, Ashcroft's proposed development calls for eight buildings, with the two highest on the extreme north and south ends with structures getting smaller towards the middle of the development. The building plans so far include two 25-storey towers on five-storey podiums, two 18-storey condos on two-storey podiums, a five-storey building in the centre of the development, and about three two-storey retail-and-office buildings.

Ashcroft aims to start building the middle of the development first, expanding outward over the next five to 10 years. But Ashcroft isn't exactly off the hook with residents — at least not yet.

As Allan put it, "Our question was, 'How long will this be the actual design?' Quite frankly, our concern is whether this was a sleight of hand. The concept drawings from a forward-looking architect look great, but would there be a bait and switch?"



The new Ashford Merivale housing development has the community's support — so far, and it seems to be coming from the actual design that creates a walkable main street.