

# Residents get a rare peek into Westboro convent site

## Home builder seeks to ease tensions

BY VITO PILIECI, OTTAWA CITIZEN NOVEMBER 13, 2011

Ashcroft Homes gave Westboro residents a rare peek into the secluded Sisters of Visitation convent site on Saturday in a bid to ease tensions with neighbours, who have been concerned about development on the convent lands, and showcase plans for how the land will be used.

The developer said it plans to respect the heritage site designation given to the abbey on the convent, located just off Richmond Road. It will do so by "repurposing" the building and working around its aged architecture in order to accommodate more modern-day commercial businesses.

"It won't be an abbey anymore," said David Choo, president of Ashcroft Homes. "We are going to embrace its history, but open it up and renovate it to make this part of everything that is important to Westboro. Q West is changing the centre of gravity of Westboro."

The facility will be renovated to include a spa, a performance arts theatre, a restaurant and a café, as well as numerous pathways and outdoor courtyards. However, the exterior and structure of the 100-year-old property will remain unchanged.

Part of the Saturday open house at the site was to ask people living nearby what kind of commercial development they would like to see on the site. Representatives from Ashcroft were handing out and collecting surveys in order to collect feedback about their plans.

Completing construction on the abbey is an important part of Ashcroft's vision for the entire 2.2-hectare development along Richmond Road. The site will eventually see the construction of three buildings, which will house 600 condominium units. Demand for the units in trendy Westboro is high. Across the street from the abbey is 101 Richmond Rd., a six-storey Ashcroft development that has already sold out. Another low-rise condominium complex, 111 Richmond Rd., is under construction and is 50 per cent sold. The company is just starting to sell units in its third building, Q West, which is also located on the property.

The three large condo projects are being designed so they all direct traffic towards the abbey and the businesses it will house.

"We are at a very important part of this development. We have a lot of work to do," said Paul Rothwell, director of planning and development at Ashcroft. "The single biggest challenge is how we best use the convent structure. We're anxious to see what people have in their minds about this space."

Development on the convent lands, which Ashcroft purchased from the Soeurs de la Visitation

religious order for \$12 million, has been a contentious issue. Several community groups have spoken out in opposition to any development taking place.

Ashcroft settled the complaints with opposing parties in June by offering a \$200,000 donation to a community trust fund, which will be administered by a nonprofit corporation made up of local groups and used to help better the immediate community.

Residents who turned out to the open house were more interested in getting a peek inside the closed convent than they were in seeing Ashcroft's plans. Most walked right past Ashcroft posters and architectural renderings, in favour of seeing the Soeurs de la Visitation's former kitchen, dining area and chapel. Many came with cameras in hand, ready to take pictures.

Mike Foubert, who lives nearby, said it's sad to see the old convent go. He remembered a time when nuns lived in the convent, mingled among the community and would offer retreats to family members who needed to get away.

"It's a shame it's gone," he said. "But the chapel is just not attracting enough profit."

The Soeurs de la Visitation d'Ottawa Monastery was founded in 1909, when the Soeurs de la Visitation bought the property from Ottawa newspaperman George Holland. The nuns immediately oversaw the construction of walls to close in the monastery from the outside world. Four wings were added and arranged around a central courtyard, a common feature in monasteries throughout Europe.

While few visitors were allowed into the closed facility, the public was always welcome to worship in the monastery's chapel. The nuns lived on the property for more than 100 years.

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