

Building complete communities

WHERE PEOPLE LIVE



Calin and Amanda Miculescu were looking for a change from the downtown lifestyle. TIM FRASER

People looking to buy low-rise homes in the GTA are struggling to get their hands on one.

Calin Miculescu and his wife Amanda rent a one-bedroom condo in downtown Toronto. For the last couple of years, they've been saving – but prices and availability have been challenging. “We looked east, west and north of the city before we settled on a neighbourhood near where we grew up in Aurora, with lots of green space and amenities within walking distance,” says Miculescu.

The Miculescus have chosen Aurora Trails, a new residential development in the heart of Aurora.

More than ever, prospective homeowners looking to move to new low-rise dwellings – detached, semi-detached or townhomes – are facing challenges. People from all de-

mographics are drawn by the space, both square footage and outdoor green space, of ground-based housing. However, throughout the Greater Toronto Area, there are simply not enough low-rise homes being built to accommodate the huge demand for this housing option, with many new developments coming in the form of high-rise condominiums.

While the high-rise market has been keeping up with the increasing demand from the GTA's growing population, supply of ground-related homes is among the lowest in decades. This isn't an oversight on the part of developers in the GTA: homebuilders are restricted by provincial and municipal regulations that limit new construc-

tion of low-rise dwellings.

“It goes back 10 years, when the provincial government implemented an intensification plan, putting restrictions on how and when land could be developed,” explains Jim Andrews, director of sales & marketing for Fieldgate Homes, one of the four builders in the Aurora Trails community. “That slowed development and pinched off the supply available in the GTA, limiting our ability to keep up with the growing demand for low-rise homes.”

Statistics confirm the difficulties developers face with the limited but important low-rise market. According to Bryan Tuckey, president and chief executive officer of the Building Industry and Land Develop-

ment Association (BILD), approximately 75 per cent of new homes sold in the GTA 10 years ago were low-rise. Today, the market is dominated by high-rise sales, with an emphasis on development that grows up rather than out.

It's the legacy of a provincial growth plan enacted in 2006 that aims to increase population density in urban centres and transit corridors to accommodate the continuing population growth: projected at up to 100,000 people each year for the next 15 years.

“Developable areas that are shovel ready and have municipal services like roads and sewers, within the boundaries of the growth plan, have become limited and are therefore more expensive” says Tuckey. “Increasing government charges and fees, along with construction costs, have also contributed to rising housing prices across the region.”

Recent figures released by national real estate statistics consultant RealNet Canada Inc. showed the average new low-rise home in March in the GTA priced at \$733,578, while the average price of a new condo suite was \$422,672.

BILD has been at the forefront of educating government officials and GTA residents about the needs of the region's growing population, while advocating on behalf of the industry and new-home buyers to invest in new growth-related infrastructure.

Yet with all these challenges, new home developments can't keep up to the vast demand among potential homeowners who are struggling for a way into the highly competitive low-rise market. More and more, developments like Aurora Trails sell out well before they even break ground.

This master-planned community was nominated for the BILD Project of the Year and the 2015 People's Choice Award. The 600 or so homes in the development range from between about \$600,000 and \$1 million; phase 1 of the project, just now

beginning construction, sold out in a matter of weeks and sales for phase 2 are about to start in early June, according to Daniel Salerno, director of operations, sales & marketing for Aurora Trails builder Paradise Developments.

But there are more reasons for Aurora Trails' popularity than just the high demand for homes. “Aurora Trails sits between Bayview and Leslie at St. John's Sideroad, right in the midst of a well-established area. It's within a two-minute car ride of important features like schools, shopping, transit and the highway,” says Salerno.

“Developable areas that are shovel ready and have municipal services like roads and sewers ... have become limited.”

Bryan Tuckey, president and CEO of BILD

The community has also been carefully planned to incorporate lots of green and natural heritage features. “Forty per cent of the land in the community is environmentally protected,” says Andrea DeGasparis-Ronco, president of OPUS Homes, another Aurora Trails builder. “An intertwined trail system will allow residents access to hiking and biking trails and parks within the community. A wildlife park will also be central to this community, to enhance habitat creation and protection and offer unique recreational and educational opportunities.”

For the Miculescus, who are expecting their first baby this summer, all these were perfect reasons to buy their new home. “Like many young professionals, we've lived the downtown lifestyle, but we want to be able to offer our kids an experience like we had growing up, and that's what we found in Aurora Trails.”

THE RISING PRICE OF GTA HOMES

As housing prices continue to soar, the gap between high-rise and low-rise (detached homes, semis and townhouses) is also widening. Builders say a big issue is the lack of developable land, that is serviced and designated for future development, due in part to government plans and regulations that restrict how and when land can be developed. With the population of the GTA increasing by about 100,000 per year, home builders simply can't keep up to the rising demand for low-rise homes, and as such new housing developments are selling out in record times.



SUCCESSFULLY INTEGRATING INTO THE COMMUNITY

On the southwest corner of Church and Front Street East, The Berczy is an elegant boutique-style condominium residence in the heart of Toronto's historic centre. Adjacent to the architecturally celebrated Flatiron Building and only a block from the St. Lawrence Market, The Berczy presented unique challenges for the developer.

“It was important to us and to the neighbourhood that the building's form and materials respectfully integrate into the context of the community,” says Kelly Wilson, vice president of development for Concert Properties Ltd., the developer of The Berczy.

“The north side on Front Street has the look of merchant buildings, using rich textures and materials like limestone, granite and brick,” he says. The architecture on Church Street just south of Front is reminiscent of a brick warehouse, with large skip-frame windows. At the south end of Church Street is



The Berczy combines a reconstructed heritage façade with a distinctly modern exterior. CONTRIBUTED

the reconstructed heritage façade of the manufacturing building that once stood there.

In contrast, the upper floors have a distinctly modern exterior. “The lighter look on top gives it an airier, less imposing look,” says Wilson. And to make the upper floors less visible to pedestrians, floors are “terraced” away from the street as the building rises.

The result has been met with enthusiasm. “People in the community love the look, but also appreciate Concert's collaborative approach and use of good planning principals, like integrated public art, parking and loading zones that are out of sight, and 13,000 square feet of popular retail space at street level for residents and the community.”

Of course, the interior design and amenities were also carefully considered for residents, with large open-concept suites appointed and designed for function and aesthetics. “With only 166 suites, it was important to find just the

right balance of outdoor, recreation, fitness, social and entertaining space,” says Wilson.

The proximity to Toronto's financial core is also a big draw for many residents, who can walk or cycle to work in minutes. The Berczy is close to many of Toronto's top entertainment venues and great shopping. “We're also highly serviced by public transit and the Gardiner Expressway.”

The Berczy is an example of how developers can meet the needs of homeowners and the community without sacrificing style.

This is the first in a 3-part series sponsored by BILD. Look for the next one on Saturday, May 30.

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