

NEWHOMES



The shape of things to come. Expect virtual tours of condos and homes to become common practice sooner rather than later. See also, story page 4.

Buying a new home or 'resale': What now?



MARTIN SLOFSTRA
EDITOR'S
NOTE

Finding a new home, or a better home, or selling one has definitely fallen on Canadians' list of priorities given the current climate of uncertainty.

Online searches are way down, open houses have closed and visits to new home sites are postponed.

We know this anecdotally, but also check out the numbers. The first sign of this became apparent upon a closer look at activity on Point2Homes, a web site which covers real estate market trends and news. (Visit point2homes.com.)

On March 11, visits to the site dropped 8%, only to continue the following day with a 20% drop, and then 24% on March 13, reaching the most significant decrease March 16 at 32%.

This corresponds with Google Trends data showing decreasing interest in real estate-related terms such as "houses for sale", "homes for sale", and "condos for sale"; with searches for terms like "work from home", "home office" and "home

workout" on the rise.

This, of course, is normally the time of year when the housing market starts to heat up, both on the new home and resale side. Much of the activity associated with home buying and home selling is simply on hold, as people are trying to see where the pandemic is headed.

Still, don't expect all activity to stop either. Dave Wilkes, chairman of BILD, who writes a column that appears every other week in this section, has been in regular contact with his members to understand what actions they are taking.

"Companies are enabling social distancing through remote work where possible. Many are opening sales centres by appointment only, taking in one person at a time, or closing them entirely for now."

But there isn't really an across the board action taken by new home builders — individual company actions may vary based on their own unique situations, he says.

"Be assured though, they are taking steps to ensure increased hygiene, sanitation and cleaning for locations that remain operational."

On the resale side, the Ontario Real Estate Association (OREA) is urging Ontario's realtors to stop all

face-to-face business, including open houses, agent and public office hours, and in-person showings in occupied homes, during the province's state of emergency.

Earlier this week the Ontario government declared real estate an essential service in order to permit transactions to close.

"I want to make it clear that this does not mean business as usual for Ontario's realtors. It's time to stop all face-to-face business including open houses, maintaining agent and public office hours and in-person showings, especially in cases where a property is tenant-occupied," said Sean Morrison, OREA President.

"If a client has an urgent need to sell or buy a home during the crisis, realtors have the modern tools and technology at their disposal to do virtual showings, remote interactions, conference calls, and digital signing."

Andrew Brethour, CEO, PMA Brethour Realty Group says Mattamy Homes appears to be the only major builder who has shut down sales offices, and at least temporarily, stopped construction.

Most sites remain open by appointment but doors are generally locked to drop-in visitors; traffic is allowed in one person or couple at a time, and site personnel are practicing safe distancing.

Some other things to be aware of, says Brethour, is to expect delays in closings. "There is a provision in the Taron Warranty concerning unavoidable delays and what's called a 'Force Majeure' — unforeseeable circumstance that prevent someone from fulfilling a contract — and that is COVID-19."

Once a determination is made of a Force Majeure, the vendor has 20 days to send out a first notice of potential delays. Expect this to be commonplace in the next week from most builders.

Brethour also recommends checking with your lawyer to get a clear understanding of the Taron rules and wording of the notice.

As for extensions on deposits and closings, this will vary by each builder's policy. In some cases extensions to a deposit schedule are not being granted and in other cases some are, generally, a 30-day extension.

It's hardly business as usual but builders will carry on best as they can. Do expect to see virtual sales models that reduce or eliminate any human contact.

A whole other topic though and more about that later.

Before and after COVID-19, safety is construction's top priority



RICHARD LYALL
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As the COVID-19 pandemic story has unfolded in the GTA, many homebuyers have questions about the conditions in which their home is built.

There has been a lot of attention focused on the state of construction sites, and with good reason. Premier Doug Ford said construction sites must maintain sanitary conditions or they will be shut down.

Safety has and always will be the industry's top priority. Everyone already has a role to play in health and safety and are trained accordingly. This is now enhanced.

As the GTA's housing crisis continues, it is essential to build homes for people and ensure that our infrastructure and transportation systems are built, given the existing deficit.

CTV News reported the story of a pregnant woman and her husband who could end up homeless as their new home in Milton will not be ready for their closing date because construction was shut down on that site. There will be more stories like this.

That's why it was critical for the construction industry and labour to collaborate on the new best practices protocol and Ministry of Labour guidelines for all employers and personnel.

Site safety is the builders' responsibility and they must work with subtrades employers and others to ensure all on-site personnel and work sites are safe.

Guide co-author Patrick McManus, acting executive director with the Ontario Sewer and Watermain Construction Association, adds: "With more than 400,000 people working in Ontario construction, everyone has a role to play in ensuring the safety of their colleagues, managers and the public, and there is simply no excuse for unclean, unsafe behaviour right now."

The industry best practice guide, called "COVID-19: What you need to know about Health and Safety and Working On-Site," includes seven safety recommendations.

1. Maintain good personal hygiene: Everyone should avoid touching their faces with unwashed hands. Cough and sneeze into your elbow or a tis-

sue and wash your hands often.

2. On-site sanitation: All employers have an obligation to provide access to more handwash stations with soap and water, washroom facilities and an increased cleaning schedule.

3. Practise physical distancing: Employers can stagger start times, breaks, lunches, total number of people on site and coordinate pinch points, including hoists and site trailers, to keep people safely apart. Limit unnecessary on-site contact between workers and outside service providers, for example, cancel the coffee truck.

4. Communicate policies: COVID-19 policies need to be posted and communicated to all employees, contractors and trades, including sanitization practices, ensuring physical distancing and how work will be scheduled.

5. Protect your family and room-mates: On-site workers should wash clothes as soon as they get home.

6. Report illness: Everyone should notify their supervisor and call public health immediately if they experience cold or flu-like symptoms. They must go home and self-isolate for 14 days. When home, complete the self-assessment on the Ontario COVID-19 website and follow instructions, or call telehealth (1-866-797-0000), your local public health unit or your family physician.

7. Track sick workers: This will allow employers to better inform public health partners if issues arise on site. That includes communication with health and safety representatives, the joint health and safety committee and trade union representatives.

"As always, the Occupational Health and Safety Act allows workers to refuse unsafe work. This longstanding workplace protection has not changed," McManus adds.

"As a new normal emerges and the construction industry adapts, we recommend a case-by-case and site-by-site approach to new and enhanced safety protocols, rather than a blanket approach to construction by officials."

The industry must continue to work together safely, and that can happen if everyone follows the rules. Find more at rescon.com.

Richard Lyall, president of RESCON, has represented the building industry in Ontario since 1991. Contact him at media@rescon.com.