

'Unicorn sites' aplenty in Toronto

by Neil Sharma 01 May 2019



Few things in Toronto are scarcer than developable land—which is exactly why so-called “unicorn sites” are being touted a way to boost much-needed housing supply.

“It’s a term we use to describe a piece of property with one or two towers that have room for third and even fourth towers,” said Tony Irwin, president and CEO of the Federation of Rental-Housing Providers of Ontario. “We need municipal government to expedite approvals, though, because land is no longer abundant, so if those sites can be leveraged to build another tower, government should be supportive and expedite approvals.”

There is certainly no shortage of unicorn sites in Toronto. CityPlace, the sprawling master-planned community west of the CN Tower is one among many commodious sites that could support additional towers, says the **president of the Residential Construction Council of Ontario**.

“There are no drawbacks to building on unicorn sites in Toronto,” said **Richard Lyall**. “We don’t want more urban sprawl, so we have to go up. Land is at a premium and land is one of the

biggest costs associated with housing, so if you have other sites where you can put up the building, what's the problem? Somebody complaining about getting additional shade? Get over it.

“If you already have the land, that saves a lot of money. Right off the bat, it might not save a lot of money, because you're feeding into a market that's pretty heady, but if you open up that kind of land to redevelopment that will start lowering prices.”

The preponderant reason for escalating prices in Toronto, added Lyall, is bureaucracy. Citing a RESCON study, he says that rezoning in 2006 took six months, but a decade later it billowed to three and a half years. Site plan approval should only take a month, as stipulated under the Planning Act, but RESCON determined it took 18 months in 2016.

“The big problem with the system right now is the zoning is antiquated, the site plan approval process is a mess and you don't know when you're getting approved, so you better have deep pockets to see a project through to completion,” said Lyall. “We need to make the system more predictable.”

As-of-right zoning is an idea that's been peddled for some time, most recently by the Ontario Real Estate Association and Ryerson University's Centre for Urban Research and Land Development, and Lyall believes—should it ever be legislated—that it should include a provision for unicorn sites.

“Any site where you can get more buildings up, unicorn sites should be encouraged,” he said. “I'd argue there should be as-of-right zoning for these things. Some can be adjusted and you can add mid-rise buildings, but the reasons these projects have trouble is the approvals process is convoluted and development charges are so high that the economics don't always work.”