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Gem by the lake waiting to shine

[ROYSON JAMES](#)

If I let you in on a hot investment secret, you must promise not to act on it for a week or so; that'll give me enough time to get in on the ground floor before everyone hops aboard the gravy train that is south Etobicoke.

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Imagine a place where 57 per cent of the new residents in the past four years have family incomes over \$100,000. Consider that they are dying to buy furniture, clothes, food but have to travel outside their area just to spend their money. And they are crying out for more stores, boutiques, coffee shops, bookstores, specialty shops, not to mention department stores and supermarkets.

"Oh, just to have a Starbucks," moans resident Michelle Sloan, at a reception this week designed to attract retailers and other businesses to the next hot Toronto neighbourhood. "There's money to be made here."

Rookie councillor Mark Grimes took investors and media on a tour of one of the city's best-kept secrets Wednesday. His predecessor Irene Jones gave me the same tour some 18 months ago. Each time the impact is the same: wait 'till Toronto discovers this Beaches West district, this village by the lake that's in the midst of an unheralded transformation.

Nestled between the Gardiner Expressway and the lake, east from the Mississauga border to the Humber River, south Etobicoke is beginning to draw attention. The infrastructure is there — good transportation links to the GO Train, streetcar, Highways 427, 401, 407 and the Gardiner; terrific location next to the water and halfway between downtown and the airport.

Blessed by natural beauty, abundant parks and naturalized green space, lakefront vistas and a laid-back ambience that belies its near-downtown location, this is a gem of a neighbourhood. Make that a series of neighbourhoods.

For while outsiders may simply see a succession of bungalows and factories and strip mall retail and sprouting condos and townhouses where manufacturing plants once stood, the old-timers see separate communities. They are Alderwood, Long Branch, New Toronto (now Lakeshore Village), Mimico and, with the arrival of a waterfront condo development the size of a 12,000-person town, Mimico by the Lake.

Gone are the employment giants like Goodyear and Anaconda Brass, the foundries and widget manufacturers, the heavy industries that have left an inventory of contaminated lands the city now peddles with enticements and grants and tax breaks. The new jobs have been slow to arrive. Since 2000, south Etobicoke lost a net total of 4,780 jobs, a recent Vital Signs study reports. That hasn't stopped the influx of younger, more affluent residents as condos and townhomes race along.

A commercial market study of the area, by Talbot Consultants, concludes that retailers should target their merchandise to middle-income earners. When south Etobicoke residents make major purchases, they invariably shop outside the neighbourhood.

Still, the image of blue collar, low-income south Etobicoke endures. Never mind the million-dollar homes along Lake Promenade and Lake Shore Dr. Ignore the 12,000 residents that have transformed the most eastern tip into a wildly successful and desirable lakefront community overlooking that stunning bridge over Humber River, and enticing views back towards the towers of downtown.

"People want to walk up to Lakeshore to find a good restaurant and a coffee shop. We don't have that," Grimes tells the investors. He would repeat it like a mantra throughout the two-hour tour and the evening reception featuring Mayor David Miller and an up-tempo video selling the virtues of the place.

Residents mingled with business types and city staff at the reception in the Assembly Hall, a reclaimed meeting place that used to serve residents of Lakeshore Psychiatric Hospital, before it closed.

Mark Selkirk, responsible for making the fibreglass moose of Mel Lastman fame, lives in one of the condos that sit on the former Goodyear site.

The area is "saddled" with a blue-collar image, he says, but all the indicators suggest an image correction is around the corner. "You can't have that huge economic engine sitting there without something happening," he says.

The city, area BIA and residents are doing their part to promote the district.

TEDCO, the development arm of the city, announced this week it has all but agreed to a deal that'll bring 175,000 square feet of warehouse use to a portion of a huge vacant tract of land, formerly Anaconda Brass.

Another similar deal delivers 90,000 square feet of food warehouse distribution use on former CN lands. Both take advantage of unprecedented new tax incentives from city hall that rebate as much as 62 per cent.

Toronto police is building a police academy on the former Continental Can site, next to the Campbell Soup company. Campbell is one of the few manufacturers that stayed.

The city has targeted Lake Shore Blvd. from Long Branch to Mimico, for special treatment with the "Avenue" designation. The city is to improve street furniture, streetscape and loosen zoning requirements to create a more urban street, with strong architecture, art and public space.

Local businesses can get up to \$10,000 in matching city funds to help renovate and fix up the facades of their buildings.

Area business improvement associations have combined forces to give the area a boost.

Humber College's lakeshore campus is turning into a gem, an absolute delight, using the renovated residences of the former psychiatric hospital. Total investment is \$75 million.

And a new Catholic high school is coming to the corner of Kipling and Lake Shore Blvd.

Told you this was a happening place. Quick, call my banker.

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