

TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT CASE STUDY

METROPOLE, Ottawa, Ontario



170 LANARK AVENUE

Figure 1—Metropole Tower

Project data

Project name	Metropole at Island Park residential tower and townhouses
Developer	Minto Developments Inc.
Date completed	2004
Site area	Approximately 2.8 ha (7 acres)
Number, type, size of residential units	153 apartments in the residential tower, ranging from 90–240 m ² (970–2,600 sq. ft.); 68 townhouses approximately 165 m ² (1,800 sq. ft.)
Other land uses on the site	Semi-public open space and pedestrian path to Transitway (rapid bus network)
Gross residential density	79 uph
Maximum height	32 storeys
Parking	Underground parking garage with one space per unit for tower residents; one- and two-car garages for townhouse residents; 24 surface spaces for tower visitors
Selling price (2005)	Townhouses start at \$249,900; condos range from \$240,000 to \$1.5 million
Type of transit	Transitway (rapid bus network)
Distance to transit station	200 m (650 ft.)
Pedestrian connectivity	Good

PROJECT SUMMARY

METROPOLE

Metropole is a residential development in Ottawa's Westboro neighbourhood, about six km (3.7 mi.) west of downtown. Comprised of a 32-storey condominium tower and 68 townhouses, Metropole takes full advantage of the site's proximity to and view of the Ottawa River. Ottawa's Transitway (rapid bus network) abuts the south side of the site, with the Westboro Station less than 200 metres from the site.

Residents have access to several neighbouring public green spaces, including an extensive linear park system along the Ottawa River. There is a vibrant commercial corridor 400 m to the south, which is the heart of Westboro, an established residential neighbourhood with associated facilities such as churches, schools and so on.

The project was built on a vacant site in an area where there has been residential intensification over the past 10 to 15 years. Mid- to high-rise buildings and townhouses have been built on vacant or former industrial lands adjacent to the site. While there are some other nodes of higher-density development in Westboro, the neighbourhood for the most part is a low-rise residential area of mostly single-family homes.

TRANSIT SYSTEM OVERVIEW AND PROJECT CONTEXT

Westboro is a residential neighbourhood close to Ottawa's downtown. In the past 10 years or so, there has been new residential development, mainly near the linear park along the Ottawa River and the Transitway, with new mixed-use development along the neighbourhood's traditional main street, Richmond Road.

The Transitway is a rapid bus network using disused railway lines and other rights of way. Since its beginnings in 1982, the Transitway has increased in size, to six routes and 37 stations, and in ridership. Service is frequent—approximately every five minutes during peak travel times—providing a 10–15 minute commute to downtown Ottawa.

The Westboro Transit station is only one stop from the Tunney's Pasture transit hub, a federal government employment node that is well-served by the Transitway. Fortunately, in the Westboro neighbourhood the Transitway is below grade, which provides a more sympathetic environment for residential development than a rapid bus lane at grade.

Redevelopment around the Westboro station has occurred incrementally, with a surge in development in the past five years. The area was already a well-developed residential neighbourhood and land along the Transitway offered space for additional infill development.

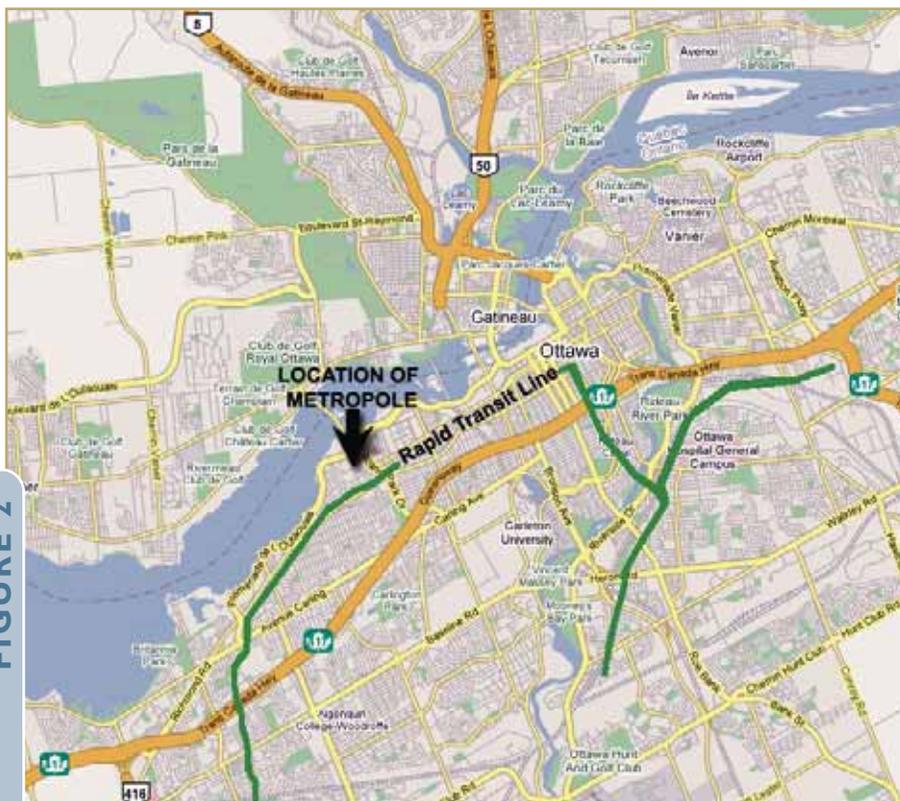


FIGURE 2

Regional context map

© Google - Map data © 2007

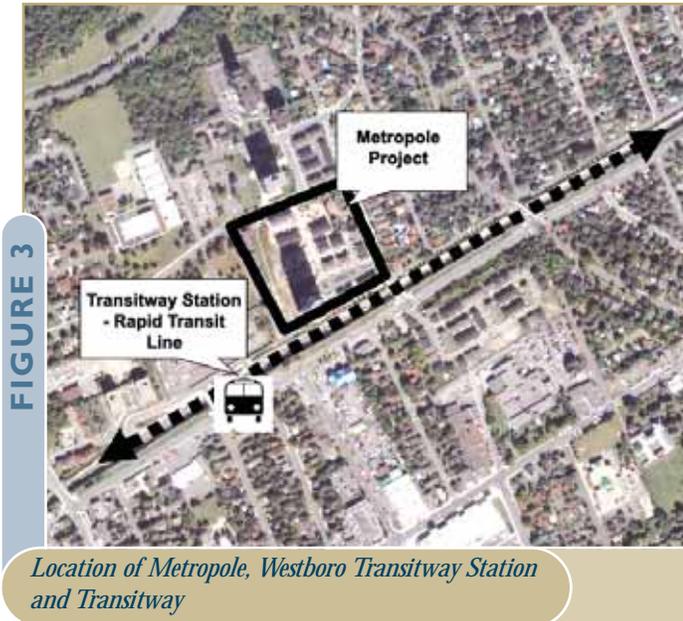


FIGURE 3

Location of Metropole, Westboro Transitway Station and Transitway

The disappearance of some light industry near the transit corridor, in addition to existing vacant land, has made way for higher-density residential development.

Westboro has been a vibrant and stable neighbourhood for the past century. The arrival of the Transitway in 1982 improved public transit service in the tradition of the streetcar, which served the community earlier in the 20th century. When the Transitway was completed, parcels of land were still available along the transit corridor. The Metropole project was developed on an unused site.

Recent development has added new housing types, especially condominium projects, to an area composed mostly of single-family homes. While this new development has increased densities in the area, the residential character and historic fabric of the neighbourhood have not been eroded. Efforts have been made to preserve the character and scale of the area by focusing development on previously vacant land along the edges of the pre-existing lower-density areas, and by using design guidelines to preserve the relationship of buildings to the existing streets and encourage a pedestrian-oriented environment.

Since the completion of the Metropole project in 2004, additional development has taken place near the Westboro Station Transitway stop and only a few parcels with development potential are left.

¹ The Greenbelt is a 20,000 ha (49,420 acre) area surrounding Ottawa's urban core, made up primarily of green space.

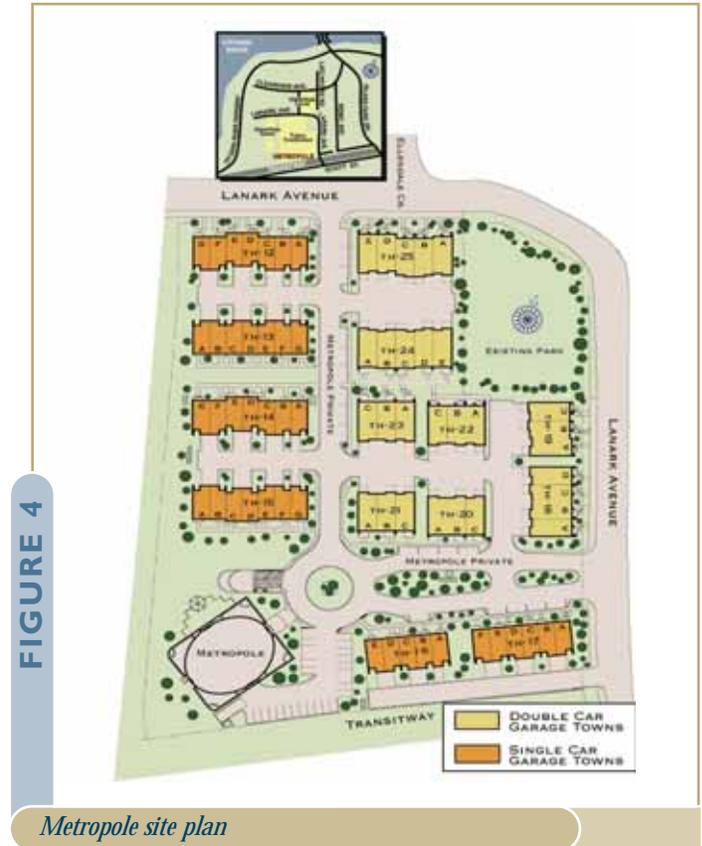


FIGURE 4

Metropole site plan

Development of the vacant lands near the Transitway in Westboro has been largely driven by market factors: the availability of vacant, uncontaminated land in a predominantly residential area near downtown, on a major transit route and close to the Ottawa River are major attractions for developers.

This type of development is consistent with Ottawa's official planning policies. In 2003, the City of Ottawa adopted an official plan (part of an overall growth management scheme called Ottawa 20/20). The Official Plan included policies to stem suburban growth outside the Greenbelt,¹ for example, by imposing higher development charges outside the Greenbelt. The plan encourages higher-density growth around transit stations, for example, by reducing parking requirements in developments within 400 m of a transit station.

These policies were adopted too late to influence the planning and approval of the Metropole, but they are consistent with those found in the official plan for the City of Ottawa

before amalgamation with municipalities of the former Ottawa-Carleton Regional Municipality and in the regional official plan. These policies may have played a role in the City's decision to allow a height increase to 32 storeys from 12 storeys, for which the site was originally zoned.

Ottawa 20/20 also includes a Transportation Master Plan (TMP), which establishes strategies to improve service on and extend existing transit lines. The Transitway has expanded to accommodate the region's growth projections. In 2001, the O-train, a rail transit line, was introduced.

The current TMP sets an ambitious goal of carrying 30 per cent of peak hour person-trips on transit by 2021, doubling the rate from 2003. For 28 per cent of residents of Metropole that were surveyed as part of this case study, public transit is the main mode of travel to work, compared to the Ottawa-Hull CMA average in 2001 of 18.5 per cent.

DEVELOPER'S PERSPECTIVE

Minto Developments has played a significant role in shaping Ottawa housing. Ottawa's largest residential developer, Minto has completed more than 60 residential projects in the last half century.² Despite its development history, urban high-rise development is a new project type for Minto.

Several factors contributed to Minto's site selection and design for the Metropole. The site offered proximity to the river, giving residents views of the river and downtown Ottawa, as well being close to amenities such as parks, public transit and a walkable shopping district. A strong real-estate market, especially in condominium sales, allowed Minto to make the most of the site by building a high-rise tower. Proximity to the Transitway offered an amenity that the developer believes will become more advantageous over time and with a change in travel habits.

In the past 10 or so years, Westboro has seen infill development and new construction that has gradually increased residential densities. Other mid-rise buildings near the Metropole tower began to be built in the 1970s and the numbers have increased since then. The success of the Metropole project, in terms of quick sales, shows that housing of this quality and location was needed—projects

like Metropole offer housing to people who want to remain or move into the Westboro community, but do not need a large, single-family home.

Efforts were made to use a contemporary architectural style. The tower combines intersecting rectangular and curvilinear forms and large window areas that create an unusual profile and take full advantage of views of the Ottawa River. The design has been recognized as a unique feature by a number of design professionals and associations, including the Ottawa-Carleton Home Builders' Association (OCHBA), which selected the Metropole as the best high-rise residential project in 2004. As Ottawa's tallest residential building, the project has been recognized as a positive addition to the City's skyline.

Named after an upscale hotel in Monte Carlo, the Metropole project was aimed at high-end, rather than first-time, homebuyers. The building offered a level of quality that was not previously available in high-rise developments in the area. It has attracted residents who are, in general, retired or at the end of their careers, although there are some singles and young professionals.

Initial plans called for amenities to be shared among residents of both the towers and the townhouses. Subsequently, however, the developer decided that amenities should be exclusive to each housing type to accommodate the needs of different types of residents.



FIGURE 5

Metropole tower and townhouses are adjacent to the Transitway

² Goff, Kristen. "Mintopolis," *The Ottawa Citizen*, May 21, 2005, B1.

Municipal support

In keeping with the objectives of Ottawa's Official Plan, the Metropole tower and townhouses offer density, open space and public transit proximity. The original development plans called for several mid-rise towers, which would have obstructed neighbours' views of the river.

A height variance was granted, thus providing flexibility to allow for a single, 32-storey building on a site zoned for only 12 storeys. The resulting high-rise tower, with the accompanying townhouses, offers residential intensification without the uniform character of the mid-rise towers originally proposed for the site. Furthermore, the siting of the tower on one corner of the property served to meet setback requirements while also guaranteeing close proximity to transit as well as views of the river to as many tenants as possible.

Parking and bicycle storage

Vehicles belonging to tower residents are accommodated in underground parking (one space per unit). The townhouses have one- or two-car garages. Parking spaces for tower residents are not included in the price of condominiums (with the exception of penthouse units) but can be purchased.



FIGURE 6

Metropole townhouses

The City of Ottawa only requires one parking space per unit for residences within 400 m of public transit. Because the Metropole is so close to the Transitway, Minto was only required to provide one parking space per unit. The only surface parking on the site is 24 spots for visitors to the tower.

There is bicycle storage in the underground garage. Both the waterfront park and the linear park along Scott Street have cycling paths.

Project success and costs

The project includes 153 condominium apartments in the tower, ranging in size from 90 to 240 m² (970 to 2,600 sq. ft.) and 68 townhouses of approximately 165 m² (1,800 sq. ft.) each.

In 2005, selling prices for the condo units in the tower ranged from \$240,000 to \$1.5 million, while townhouses started at \$249,900. This compares to the average 2004 selling price in Ottawa for new apartments of \$235,777 and for townhouses of \$202,161.³

Most units were sold within 12 months of completion and the project met Minto's profit expectations. The success of the Metropole project suggests that a new consumer market accepts a more urban lifestyle, which includes high-rise living, a pedestrian-friendly environment and public transit use.⁴

Barriers and obstacles

Because a zoning variance was needed there was public consultation. The initial plan for several high-rise towers raised neighbourhood concerns about the massing of the buildings. This was resolved when Minto revised the plan and proposed a single, higher tower. The tower, in turn, raised concerns about shadows and traffic. Minto was able to alleviate strong opposition to the proposal with studies showing that impacts would be minimal.

³ CMHC, Ontario Market Analysis Centre, Ottawa

⁴ Kristen Goff, "Ottawa develops taste for condos," *The Ottawa Citizen*, Jan. 9, 2003, B1.

FIGURE 7



Townhouses and tower

Although residents surveyed use public transit as their main way of travel to work at a higher rate than the average for the Ottawa-Hull CMA (Census Metropolitan Area), many residents still use their cars for their daily commutes.⁵ Minto anticipates that the proximity of the project to the Transitway will provide an opportunity for residents to shift their habits from automobile use to public transit. Likewise, close proximity to services and amenities encourages cycling and walking. These lifestyle changes are expected to be gradual. In an effort to encourage public transit use and maintain pedestrian connections to the neighbouring area to the south, Minto constructed a pedestrian path through the site leading to the Transitway.

Key success factors and lessons learned

At the time of its completion, market conditions were very favourable for residential development. There was a base of homebuyers for whom the idea of condominium living was very appealing.

Proximity to the Transitway was promoted in all marketing materials; this seems to have been a contributing factor for some but certainly not all of the buyers. The Metropole project seems to have filled a gap for accommodations

⁵ See the survey results in the “Residents’ Perspectives” section.

⁶ In the City of Ottawa, height variances are considered a minor variance and do not require a formal zoning change.

⁷ Development charges are less for development within the Greenbelt; for example \$6,468 for a two-bedroom apartment outside the Greenbelt, compared to the Metropole charge of \$5,897 per unit within the Greenbelt. Development charges have increased since the Metropole project.

of this type at this price range. The project's success has been associated with a strong real-estate market in combination with attention to good design so as to attract a high-end buyer.

MUNICIPAL PLANNER’S PERSPECTIVE

Planning objectives

Ottawa’s Official Plan has densification as a key objective. The Metropole tower and townhouses have increased density near a public transit node, which satisfies the goals of both Ottawa’s Official Plan and Transportation Plan. While there is additional residential development along the Transitway, there is nothing comparable in size to the Metropole.

Municipal process and support

The original development called for several mid-rise towers, which would obstruct views of the river for the project’s neighbours. A zoning variance for the site, approved by the City of Ottawa’s Committee of Adjustment, enabled the 32-storey tower to be built on a lot zoned for only 12 storeys.⁶ Following variance requirements, property owners within a 60 m radius of the site were notified of the application for the zoning variance. At this stage in the planning of the project, the municipality played a role in overseeing public consultations, traffic impact research and shadowing effect studies.

In addition to helping the City meet its smart growth objectives, large projects like Metropole generate significant revenue for the municipality. Development charges of \$7,237 per unit for the townhouses and \$5,897 per unit for the apartments amounted to about \$1.4 million.⁷

Public consultation

Public consultations were required because of the requested zoning variance. Neighbours were concerned about the massing in the initial plan for several mid-rise buildings and preferred a single tower. Although the idea of a single tower raised concerns about shadowing effects, studies showed that shadows cast by the tower would not negatively affect neighbouring residences.

In addition, there was some concern that the project would result in traffic congestion. Minto was required to conduct a traffic study to address this issue. The study showed that the increased traffic would be minimal. Excess traffic has not been a problem since the project was occupied.⁸

Taking into account the potential concerns of future residents, window types were chosen carefully to limit the potential for noise pollution in the apartments. Since the building's completion, there has been no evidence that residents in the tower have found noise to be a problem.

Minto Developments' response to community and resident concerns alleviated strong opposition to the project. However, the height variance prompted concern and has since resulted in more community involvement in new development planning.

As a result of this and other recent growth in the area, a community plan for Westboro is underway. The community's more proactive role in changes to the area represents the push and pull happening between the City's objective of increasing residential densities and residents' interest in maintaining the current scale and character of areas like Westboro.

Challenges

The close proximity of the Transitway's Westboro station meant that the municipality was not required to provide any additional transportation infrastructure. However, the planning department worked closely with OC Transpo to secure a pedestrian way from the Transitway through a neighbouring property owned by CBC. When negotiations to use a Hydro corridor at the edge of the CBC property failed, Minto added a pedestrian path through the Metropole site. This pathway is ostensibly reserved for the residents of Metropole, yet it is used by neighbouring residents as well.

If the original plans for a pedestrian connection had been resolved, there would be a more direct link to the Transitway for transit users. Despite this, 28 per cent of all Metropole residents surveyed travel to work by public transit and all of those commuters walk to the station.

⁸ In keeping with standard procedures for new development, the municipality added traffic lights at the intersection of Lanark Avenue and Scott Street to accommodate residents entering and leaving the site.

RESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

Forty-five residents were interviewed during the summer of 2006 to learn why they chose the Metropole, their level of satisfaction and their transportation choices.

Reason for choosing that location

While the most common motivation for moving to Metropole was location, residents surveyed listed the proximity to amenities and other advantages of the Westboro community (parks, proximity to the river, convenience and the neighbourhood's prestige) as the major factors in their choices.

Other factors included a desire to own their homes and the limited amount of maintenance (in the case of the high-rise condominiums) they could expect. The proximity to transit was not the main reason for any of the respondents. However, a fifth of those who said they bought their home at a higher price than their previous home or apartment said they did so because of proximity to public transit.

TABLE I

Reasons for choosing Metropole

Reason for choosing Metropole	Main reason (%)	Some influence (%)*
Proximity to transit	0	9
Proximity to work	13	24
Proximity to school	0	2
Proximity to amenities (for example, shopping, parks, trails)	31	62
Price of unit	3	13
Size of unit	4	11
Architectural features (for example, layout, look of building)	11	33
Other or don't know	38	58

* Total greater than 100 per cent because more than one response allowed

As a separate question, residents were asked to what extent the building’s location near transit influenced their decision. Overall 60 per cent said that the building’s location near transit had a strong or some influence on their purchase decision.

Travel to work, shopping, school

Nearly 28 per cent of residents surveyed used public transit to travel to work, which is a third more than the Ottawa-Hull CMA average. Of those who used public transit regularly, convenience ranked higher than cost as a motivation. Perhaps due to the high-end nature of the development and the wealthier clientele, car ownership rates among those surveyed tend to be slightly higher than the Ottawa average.

Travel variable	Metropole	Ottawa-Hull CMA*
Mode of travel to work	59% motor vehicle as driver 10% car pool 28% public transit 3% walk 0% bike	65% motor vehicle as driver 7.5% motor vehicle as passenger 18.5% public transit 7% walk 2% bike
Households with vehicle(s)	96%; 38% two or more cars	84%; 34% two or more cars**
Average length of trip to work	19 minutes (one-way)	65 minutes (round trip, 2005)†

* Data source: 2001 Census, Statistics Canada. For Ottawa-Hull CMA
 ** Data source: Spending Patterns in Canada, 2001, Statistics Canada. For Ottawa side of CMA.
 † Data source: General Social Survey on Time Use: Cycle 19, “The Time it Takes to Get to Work and Back,” Statistics Canada (by Martin Turcotte), 2005, For Ottawa-Gatineau CMA.

Few residents surveyed appear to have changed their travel mode to work since moving to the Metropole, although about four per cent said they use public transit more for getting to work. The same percentage of residents drive less than before for shopping and 13 per cent walk more than before for shopping.

Change since previous home	Work trips (%)	Shopping trips (%)	School or day care trips (%)
Use transit more than before	4	0	0
Drive less than before	0	4	0
Walk more than before	2	13	2
Previous home not a high-rise	64		

The Metropole project ranked high for resident satisfaction in terms of design, amenities, proximity to services and accessibility to transit, with nearly 95 per cent satisfaction in all cases. Similarly, all residents ranked the path from home to transit as satisfactory, listing safety, landscaping, quality of the pathway and attractiveness of the built environment as key factors contributing to a pleasant walk to transit.

Demographics

The Metropole project, with its high-rise housing, has in fact shifted the housing types of residents to a more dense, urban housing typology. While one-third of residents surveyed live in the Metropole tower, 64 per cent of these residents had previously lived in a single-family house. As might be expected from the price of units in the Metropole project, most household incomes were higher-than-average for the Ottawa-Hull CMA. Household size was smaller and the percentage of people over 65 was higher.⁹

⁹ 37 per cent of residents surveyed were over 65 years of age, 27 per cent between 55 and 64 and 16 per cent were 45–54, suggesting a middle-aged to retirement-age population. In 96 per cent of residences surveyed there were no family members under 18.

TABLE 4 Demographics

Demographic variable	Metropole	Ottawa-Hull CMA*
Number of people/ household	2	2.5
Age range**	7% under 35 56% 35–65 37% over 65	22% under 35 61% 35–65 17% over 65
Household income (pre-tax)	7% under \$50,000 27% \$50,000–\$100,000 51% over \$100,000 15% don't know or refused	42% under \$50,000 36% \$50,000–\$100,000 22% over \$100,000

*Data source, 2001 Census, Statistics Canada
 **For Metropole, average age of survey respondents and for Ottawa CMA, average age of household maintainer(s)

Resident responses confirm the perspective of Minto Developments; design, location and transit proximity seem to have all contributed to a successful and new housing type for the majority of its residents.

SUMMARY AND LESSONS LEARNED

Metropole residential tower and townhouses is a unique project in terms of both site planning and design. It is an example of innovative site usage and new architectural design elements in high-rise residential development in Ottawa. Similarly, it provides an example of mixed housing types, with a combination of high-rise apartments and townhouses.

From a planning perspective, it appears that the Metropole project went “under the radar” in terms of community participation. Metropole was planned before many other projects and sites in the area were reviewed for development.

The climate for development in this neighbourhood has since changed and Minto senses that it might not have been given the same height variance if the project were proposed at a later date. The degree of public involvement during the planning of the Metropole, and the resulting increased concentration of residential development in the area, has since sparked stronger community involvement and has initiated a community design plan for Westboro.

The proximity to public transit was promoted as a benefit of the project, but for the residents surveyed a much stronger motivator was proximity to amenities, such as parks and waterfront. It is expected that use of public transit will increase over time and that the location of the Metropole project will continue to be an asset for homebuyers.

From Minto’s perspective, Metropole is a successful residential development project in terms of design, marketability and profitability. In this regard, development of the Metropole site included attention to amenities such as safe, easy access to transit and other community services necessary to support the general principles of transit-oriented development. Yet as the Metropole project shows, transit-oriented development on a neighbourhood-wide scale works best when neighbouring developments and property owners can work co-operatively to succeed at providing proper connections to transit and nearby services.

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