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Mixed housing

Concept becoming more popular in the hope it will prevent ghettos

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When Regent Park's first condo project went on sale earlier this summer, there was a waiting list of buyers eager to live in Toronto's social housing hub.

Their interest, and investment, added confidence to the city's \$1-billion plan to revitalize the troubled neighbourhood by mixing public and market housing.

"There are a lot of benefits to mixed housing," said John Fox, acting vice-president of development for Toronto Community Housing.

The concept of mixed-income projects is becoming increasingly popular as cities try to move away from concentrated developments or "poor ghettos."

Hamilton may soon see its first private mixed-income development in the core if the owners of the Royal Connaught are successful in their plan to convert the hotel into affordable and market units.

Though a few public buildings are mixed, the majority of the city's social housing stock is solely rent geared-to-income. Keith Extance, director of the municipally controlled housing provider CityHousing Hamilton, said his board knows that needs to change.

"Over time we want to begin to transition the buildings to mixed," he said. "If you have a mix of people you create a community environment."

Though the market has proven that mixed projects can be attractive in the right location, debate continues on whether the projects help residents escape poverty.

Mark Joseph, a professor at Case Western Reserve University in Ohio, has studied the topic extensively. In interviews with low-income families, he found that moving from concentrated social housing to a mixed neighbourhood leads to a better quality of life.

Joseph credits the improvement to the fact that residents paying market rent tend to have higher expectations for behaviour and services, such as policing and recreation. Those residents are also more likely to be vocal in their demands and reach out to officials, explained Joseph.

"And the powers that be respond more quickly."

The market also responds to mixed neighbourhoods, increasing the likelihood of new businesses that typically steer clear of social housing complexes, said Joseph. Regent Park will gain a grocery store, bank and coffee shop thanks to the new condo.

However, evidence hasn't shown that mixed-income housing actually helps residents improve their socio-economic status. Many residents, explained Joseph, can feel increased stigma and judgment because of the economic divide, though they are living in a better neighbourhood.

"It does not necessarily change their life circumstances," he said, noting some feel more isolated. "At the end of the day they feel cut off."

The division within a mixed neighbourhood can make it difficult for residents to develop a network or shared agenda, said Joseph. However, he thinks that can be overcome with active community building and support programs.

"The jury is still out on the sustainability of these new communities," Joseph admits. But he's quick to add that doesn't mean the old model is better.

"We absolutely know that concentrating people does not work."

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