

BUSINESS

Developer blazes trail for inclusive design

PORTAGE AVENUE PROJECT TO BREAK GROUND JANUARY

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SUPPLIED

The Icon Condominiums at Portage Avenue and Minto Street will include at least eight units with accessibility features such as extra wide doorways and a barrier-free balcony.

A local developer is being called "a champion" for including as many as 12 suites with accessibility features in the 60-unit condominium complex being built on the site of the former Palomino Club.

"As far as I know, there is nobody who is not government-funded that is doing this," said Marnie Courage, director and inclusive design consultant with Enabling Access Inc.

"This is a project in the private sector that is trying to be more inclusive in their design, and that's why I say they're a champion," Courage said.

"I'm trying to get more on board, but he's certainly helping to carve a path."

Courage is referring to Keith Merkel, president of EdgeCorp Developments Ltd.

EdgeCorp is the Winnipeg residential developer that will break ground early next month on the Icon Condominiums project at Portage Avenue and Minto Street.

Merkel said at least eight of the units will include accessibility features such as extra wide doorways, wheelchair-

accessible showers or barrier-free tub/shower units, a barrier-free balcony, kitchen counters of varying heights and oven doors that open sideways, rather than downward.

If demand warrants, the company will boost that to 12 units, he said.

If all the units sell, EdgeCorp will start including accessible units in future apartment and condo projects.

"If we can appeal to a broader market, it's good for us, and it's good from a social aspect," he said.

"It's providing something that's unique and needed. So it seems to be a trend we should be getting on board with."

Enabling Access Inc. is a rehab, injury-prevention and accessibility consulting firm, and Courage said one of her missions is to educate architects, interior designers, developers, builders, contractors and tradespeople about the need to build residential and commercial buildings that are universally accessible.



That applies not just to people who are wheelchair-bound, she said, but also to people who have visual or cognitive impairments, to young families with children who have disabilities and to baby boomers who want to stay in their home even if they develop mobility problems.

"I would call it an accessible-housing crisis that we're dealing with in Manitoba. There is just not enough appropriate, accessible and affordable options."

Courage said there are accessible features and inclusive design in every new project.

She said EdgeCorp's project stands apart because its accessible units are designed for people who have a variety of problems, and they're scattered throughout the building .

"It's more than having an accessible apartment or condo, it's about having an accessible community," she said.

"It's also not just targeting people with wheelchairs. It's saying, 'Hey, we're building a space where we want diversity in our occupants.' And isn't that what we need, instead of saying all you people in wheelchairs can live here, here and here, and all you able-bodied people can live here?"

Courage likes the building's central location and the fact it's on a street with good bus service and plenty of amenities.

The Icon will have two sizes of accessible condos. One will be a 784-square-foot unit with two bedrooms and one bathroom starting at \$269,000. The other will be a 947-square-foot unit with two bedrooms and two bathrooms starting at \$299,900. All units come with one indoor parking stall.

The rest of the units in the four-storey complex are a mix of one-, two- and three-bedroom condos ranging in size from 550 square feet to just over 1,000 square feet, and ranging in price from \$169,900 to about \$300,000.

Merkel said more than 25 per cent of the 60 units have been sold already, and another 20 per cent are close to being

sold.

He said only two of the eight accessible units have been sold. He's not concerned because a lot of prospective buyers want to wait until they're built and they can see what they're getting before making a commitment.

Courage, who advised Merkel on what accessibility features to include in the units, agreed.

"I think they will fill up, but I don't think they will fill up in advance because people will want to see them."

Merkel said even if EdgeCorp doesn't pre-sell any more of the accessible units, it will still build at least eight of them on the assumption they'll sell.

He noted Manitoba's population is aging, and the number of older people who have mobility issues is increasing.

He said the company has seen that trend first-hand in some of the other five multi-family complexes it owns in the city.

"A lot of people are moving out because they can't age in place. They get wheelchair-bound or have to start using a walker, and their suites are no longer functional. So they end up going into nursing homes or assisted-living facilities earlier than they need to."

Courage believes if EdgeCorp's experiment is successful, other builders and developers will follow suit.

"It's on their radar. They hear it, they know it. They just want a return on their investment, so we have to get a couple of these going for them to see the need," she said.

"We've also got to get governments to chip in and help builders build — and developers develop not just buildings, but communities that are more accessible and also affordable."

Buzz about Jollibee

The world's ninth-largest restaurant company — Jollibee Foods Corp. — will open its first Canadian outlet Thursday in Winnipeg.

The chain's fast-food restaurant at 1406 Ellice Ave. is the first of two that will be opening in the city. The other is under construction in the Northgate Shopping Centre on McPhillips Street and will open some time in 2017.

Known as "the McDonald's of the Philippines," Jollibee offers a variety of popular Filipino dishes, such as Chickenjoy fried chicken, plates of cheesy spaghetti, peach mango pie and the Aloha Champ Burger — a bacon cheeseburger garnished with a pineapple ring.

The company also plans to open outlets in Scarborough, Mississauga and Edmonton.

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Read more by Murray McNeill.