

Living in the valley: Almonte

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When Santa parks his reindeer atop Almonte's 150-year-old Victoria Woollen Mill, he has to comply with the poop-and-scoop regulation. It says so right in the legal condominium corporation document extending annual landing rights to the jolly old fellow.

All of which may make the venerable building at 7 Mill St. the only former textile mill in the world that's being repurposed for stylish, riverside condo living, while guaranteeing Santa a touch-down strip.

Neighbourly gestures like these rooftop rights typify Almonte, 20 minutes west of Kanata in historic Lanark County.



CREDIT: Bruno Schlumberger
Almonte

With its vibrant arts community (the Puppets Up! International Puppet Festival is a must-see August event), gift and other specialty shops, picturesque setting including the Mississippi River coursing through town, and proximity to the big city, Almonte is on a growth track. But even while grooming itself for expansion, Almonte - current population about 4,800 - is determined to hold fast to its small-town charm.

Nowhere is this hybrid of past and future more evident than in the Almonte Heritage Redevelopment Group's resurrection of old industrial buildings, like the Victorian Woollen Mill, into downtown residential and commercial space.

The goal is affordable downtown housing and vibrant business space that's essential if small towns are to short-circuit urban sprawl and highway commercial development that kill their centre cores.

"We're trying to create a neighbourhood in the style of Westboro or the Glebe, where you can walk out the door and pick up a loaf of bread or a book," says Stephen Brathwaite, founder of the group with Greg Smith.

Since 1993, Brathwaite, a nationally recognized glass artist, puppeteer and self-styled redeveloper, and his Almonte partners have snapped up historic downtown properties for major makeovers.

The Victoria Woollen Mill was the first. Backing onto a waterfall of the Mississippi River and boasting oiled wooden beams and deep-set windows, it now includes a ground-floor restaurant, art gallery and shops. The balance of the building is mostly occupied by businesses, but those units are now available as condos, 10 in all ranging from 900 to 2,000 square feet and priced at roughly \$175,000 to \$385,000.

Thoburn Mill is another of the group's "adaptive reuse" projects. It's at 83 Little Bridge St. behind the Romanesque revival-style post office on Mill Street (built in the late 1800s and now home to engineering, law and other small businesses, the old post office has been usurped by a newer, box-like Canada Post building, a product of the Eyesore School of Design, further down Mill Street).

A mix of commercial and residential space, Thoburn Mill will include 13 household units once rebuilding is finished later this summer or fall. Its residential space is currently

classified as apartments, but those will become condos ranging from 1,000 to 1,650 square feet and selling in the \$210,000 to \$350,000 vicinity.

"I can walk to so many places," says Margaret Brunton who's rented her two-storey, open-concept apartment in Thoburn Mill since 2005 and is buying one of the condos. "The minute I step outside in the morning, people say, 'Hello, Margaret.' There are young people around. It's like a little community." She also praises the town's natural beauty and how secure she feels in a place where everyone knows everyone else.

Like others, Brunton's unit includes a generous deck overlooking the Mississippi and its cascading spillway (that proximity to the river means that the building's old, existing turbine will be restarted, which should make Thoburn Mill self-sufficient with green electricity). Brunton's current home is also atop the river walkway, a public area where a romantic young man apparently popped the question to his beloved within days of the snaking walkway opening a couple years ago.

Almonte architect Peter Mansfield designed Brunton's unit and most of the other spaces in the Thoburn and Victoria Woollen mills. He also planned the heavily glassed barrel-vault addition to Thoburn Mill.

"It's almost archaeological with all its different sections," says Mansfield, referring to how the mill's former owners added to it during profitable years. "It was fun fusing contemporary building materials into the old warehouse structure," he adds, referencing the glass and steel that define much of the building's common areas, the massive wood beams traversing residential ceilings and the old brick walls that define some of the commercial space.

Along with the Victoria Woollen and Thoburn mills, the Almonte Heritage Redevelopment Group rents apartments in smaller heritage buildings in downtown Almonte and has plans for residential lots and other projects around town. It's also begun work on a larger historic building at 65 Mill St. Like other projects, energy efficiency ranks high on the list of planning priorities.

Folks in town keep an interested eye on the group's doings. "It's one of the big stories here," says Don St. John, owner of Don's Meat Market at 126 Mill St., up the hill from all the redevelopment activity.

St. John moved to Almonte in 2004 after the rent at his Glen Cairn, Kanata meat shop skyrocketed. A Kanata customer suggested he consider Almonte, and St. John hasn't looked back.

"I'm doing two or three times the business here I was doing before. It's a very loyal community; if you have good prices and you're consistent, they'll support you. Also, I'm next door to a Beer Store and I sell steaks; that's a marriage made in heaven."

Despite the major chain grocery store in one of two strip malls at the entrance to town, St. John plans to expand his shop to include some grocery and other lines.

Across the road from the meat market sits an Almonte institution: The Chip Stop. The chip truck and its ancestors have been there for four decades, says attendant Marilyn Dugdale. "We get people from Ottawa saying these are the best fries they've ever tasted." She's right, they're world class: crisp on the outside, cooked but still moist inside.

While The Chip Stop boasts vintage status, it's nothing compared to the town itself, which was first settled almost 200 years ago.

Almonte went through a number of name changes until British residents of the town - no great fans of the United States - decided in the mid-1800s to name it after Mexico's General Juan Almonte who had battled American forces invading his own country.

By the late 1800s, the town's textile industry was in full swing, but by the 1950s, it had shifted to full retreat because of cheap foreign competition. The last mill closed in the early 1980s.

While all this was happening, so were other things. Not the least of them was the invention by Almonte native Dr. James Naismith of basketball. In tribute, the historic Mill of Kintail Conservation Area on the edge of town houses The Dr. James Naismith Collection.

Modern-day Almonte is now a ward of Mississippi Mills. That town was created 11 years ago by amalgamating Almonte with Ramsay and Pakenham Townships.

A stroll down Almonte's historic Mill Street reveals how crucial tourism is to the local economy. Shops, like The White Owl (antiques and collectibles, Royal Doulton a specialty), Appleton Gift & Basket, and Blackbird ("neat stuff for every nest"), abound.

While a couple of stores trumpet robust sales, most report a bad slump since the recession hit last fall. "We've had about a 30-per-cent drop," says Robin Singleton, owner of Robin's Paper Thin, 76 Mill St. Singleton opened her store, which she describes as "eclectic as hell" (funny greeting cards, hard-to-find children's and adults' games, unusual stationery), two years ago after spending 40 years in Las Vegas.

When her husband died, Singleton moved to Almonte at the urging of her sister who owns a horse farm in the area.

Recession or not, Almonte has amazing heart, she says. "Everybody helps everybody. If someone comes in and needs a birthday gift, and I don't have what they want, I'll refer them to somewhere else that does. That's what a small town is."

It's also about knowing, and caring for, each other. A stop at The Groundz Espresso & Juice Bar, located next door to Singleton's shop in what was once a gracious bank, provides not just a bracing cup of java, but also a chance to eavesdrop when an anxious looking lad trundles in. He's locked out of his house and looking for his mom. The two women behind the counter immediately suggest phone numbers he can try, and he's reassured.

"It's really homey here, you get to know their names," says Jessica Francoeur, one of those helpful women. She moved to Almonte from Ottawa because she felt it was a good place to raise her daughter. She also loves the town's heritage: "In Barrhaven or Orléans, it's like putting yourself in a box. Here, everything was something before."

(They're also often many things at once: The Groundz proudly displays work by local painters, potters and musicians.)

New arrivals, like Francoeur, are in keeping with the Mississippi Mills official plan. According to the town's Chief Administrative Officer, Diane Smithson, the current population is expected to grow to about 8,000 by 2026. Most of that expansion will occur on the town's east side, close to County Road 49 which leads to Hwy. 417 and Ottawa.

Smithson lists a number of Almonte pluses that should encourage that growth: the recently modernized, 52-bed Almonte General Hospital with its new Fairview Manor long-term care facility; the town's contribution to green power, thanks to a major expansion of its hydro-based electricity generating capacity; a new mechanical sewage treatment plant expected to roll out in 2012.

Property and education taxes in Almonte aren't much different from Ottawa's: About \$1,200 per \$100,000 of assessment, plus an annual garbage fee of \$208 in Almonte compared to roughly \$1,274 per \$100,000 of assessment in Ottawa (2008 figures). Total tax bills in Almonte increased 6.7 per cent in 2008 and 5.6 per cent this year.

"We were surprised. We thought it would be a lot cheaper to live in Almonte," says Claire Scribner. She and her young family moved there from Orléans in 2005, looking for the small-town camaraderie she remembered from her childhood in Carleton Place during the 1970s. Their neighbours include both young families who have moved from Ottawa and retirees, who reportedly flock to Almonte.

The Scribners - both Claire and Carl commute to Ottawa for work, but find it no more onerous than travelling from Orléans - live in a new, five-bedroom, 2,800-square-foot home. It was built by Neilcorp Homes (almontehomes.com) in Almonte's Metcalfe Farm subdivision.

With all the add-ons, the Scribners paid about \$400,000 for their home, which features a walk-out basement, nine-foot ceilings, hardwood floors and three full bathrooms.

You might find a comparable new home in the far reaches of Ottawa for the same price, but you'd have to look hard.

In fact, the average price for a single home in Ottawa was \$407,100, according to the December 2008 report prepared by the CRG Consulting for the Greater Ottawa Home Builders' Report. When broken down, prices for new single homes ranged from a low \$383,250 in the eastern suburbs, including Orléans and Cumberland, to \$420,340 in southern suburbans, including Riverside South and \$383,000 in western communities, including Kanata. The highest prices for a new home were inside the Greenbelt, where prices hovered at \$581,500 for a new single-family home.

Neilcorp is now selling homes in its new Riverfront Estates. Close to downtown, the site includes ready access to parkland bordering the river. Two-bedroom bungalows with a two-car garage on 50-foot lots start at \$276,900.

In Almonte's resale market, a high-end home might run \$400,000, says Clark Munro, a broker with Royal LePage Gale Real Estate on Mill Street. "You can get a good starter home with three bedrooms and new windows in the \$170,000 to \$180,000 range. I have a high ranch with three-plus-one bedrooms, a new roof, hardwood floors and a finished basement for \$248,000."

Depending on location, that same home could cost much more in Ottawa.

"Almonte doesn't have a high turnover, so there's not a huge supply," adds Munro. "But there's always something for sale. The main thing about Almonte is that it's quiet, clean, safe and friendly."

With all of the town's old-fashioned charms, including the cornucopia of concerts and other community events at the restored Old Town Hall, you do start to wonder why you live elsewhere.

Add Brathwaite's modern-day forecast and you might find yourself scrambling for a real estate agent: "I can see the day soon when we have Wi-Fi, and you'll be able to sit with your cappuccino in the square of Almonte and clear your e-mail."

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