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PLANNING

Urban strategists on the move for city's future

Sustainability is the 'driving force' for urban design firm

By **Travis Persaud** Perspectives

A piece of Vaughan's past is back to write its future. Urban Strategies helped the City put in place Official Plan Amendment 400 about 13 years ago. Now they are back leading the Vaughan Tomorrow program; an initiative to plan the City's future 25 years in advance.

"This is a three-year project where we are going to work in partnership with City staff to create the official plan," said Pino Di Mascio, planner and partner with Urban Strategies.

Presently Di Mascio and his team are trying to gain insight from Vaughan's population, to understand what they want their City to look like and how they want it to function.

"People have a chance to ask themselves what kind of place they want this to become. Their input will be listened to and some of their ideas will be embedded in municipal policy," he said.

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Urban strategists: Eric Gordon, Andrea Winkler, Pino Di Mascio, Mark Reid and Emily Reisman stand on a median near Jane St. and Highway 7, the location of Vaughan's future Corporate Centre. The team from Urban Strategies has been commissioned by the city to provide insight on where, how and when to grow. See Page A5 for more.

photo by Alessandro Garofolo

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April 24 - 30, 2008

City of Vaughan looking 25 years into the future

By **Travis Persaud**
Perspectives

The ghost of Vaughan's past has returned to direct its future.

Urban Strategies, one of Canada's largest planning and urban design firms, has taken the helm of the City's Vaughan Tomorrow growth management program. Looking 25 years into the future, Urban Strategies plans to set Vaughan on the right path towards urban growth.

But this isn't the firm's first encounter with Vaughan.

When the City put together Official Plan Amendment (OPA) 400, Urban Strategies was there leading the way. Now, 13 years later, they've returned.

"This is in one sense taking the work we did a while ago and advancing it," said Pino Di Mascio, planner and partner at Urban Strategies. "But now the thinking has changed, the policies have changed, the city has grown. So (everything) is different."

The issues in this plan are vast and complex – the main reason Di Mascio said they were interested in it.

Presently, Vaughan has about 700 official plan amendments – Di Mascio, along with his team of six,

have to create one simplified 100-page document.

"Just from this you couldn't have a more challenging project," he said. "How does a place change from a traditional suburban municipality to an urban place? I think a lot of people don't quite understand that transformation yet."

And this is why the City has chosen Urban Strategies. They have worked with municipalities around the world, with the majority in Canada, the United States and across the ocean in the United Kingdom – where 30 per cent of their workload comes from.

The City, while officially directing the vision, has placed their trust in Di Mascio and his colleagues' expertise as a guiding light.

"We give them all the advice, give the reports and do all the thinking," Di Mascio said. "Then together with City staff we decide what to bring to council."

He calls this project with Vaughan a "special relationship," since they will work closely for the next 3 years – it will be at least a year and a half of reports and studies before they can even write a first draft of the official plan.

With the amount of time and effort that's going into this forecast of the future, some might argue this is a waste of time. But Di



Eric Gordon, Andrea Winkler, Pino Di Mascio, Mark Reid and Emily Reisman are all members of Urban Strategies, an urban

photo by Alessandro Garofolo

Mascio said it's a chance to shape the City based on what the public wants to see.

"You're not regularly engaged in 25-year thinking in where your city should go," he said. "People have a chance to ask themselves

what kind of play they want this to become. Their input will be listened to and some of their ideas will be embedded in municipal policy."

He remains impressed that the idea of sustainability is the driving force that keeps coming up with everyone he speaks with. If implemented, it could put Vaughan on the map for ingenuity in this field.

"What I could foresee is one of the things this plan gets recognized for is being at the leading edge of establishing environmental principals and becoming a green, sustainable city," Di Mascio said.

When asked why the people of Vaughan should entrust them with the future of their city, he paused for a moment, and then rested on the laurels of their proven track record.

"We've been around the block, both with Vaughan and around the world," he said. "We've helped other municipalities with these plans. The biggest thing we bring to the table is that they can trust us that it's their values and ideals that are represented in the plan."

"We don't establish the vision, we help facilitate the discussion."

The second instalment of Vaughan Tomorrow's public speaker series will take place this evening (April 24) from 7-9 p.m. at the Vellore Village Community Centre.

For more information visit www.vaughantomorrow.ca.