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NEWS LOCAL

\$145 million seniors development on old hospital site

By Karena Walter, The Standard
Thursday, February 18, 2016 7:39:43 EST PM

ST. CATHARINES
RETIREMENT RESIDENCE | FOOD PHOTOGRAPHY | 18.02.2016



An artist rendering of a St. Catharines retirement residence to be built on the site of the former Ontario Street hospital. From Seasons Retirement Communities on Thursday February 18, 2016 in St. Catharines, Ont. Karena Walter/St. Catharines Standard/Postmedia Network ---

A \$145-million retirement community development is being planned for the former Hotel Dieu hospital site in St. Catharines by a company with a proven track record in Niagara.

Seasons Retirement Communities, which operates a residence in Welland, announced the massive project on the 10-acre site Thursday.

The company said construction will start this year.

"This is a great news story for economic investment into the community," said St. Catharines Mayor Walter Sendzik.

"When you look at Seasons and what they've done in other communities in Ontario, and you see the kind of investments that they make, it really does set the stage for an exciting redevelopment for a significant property in St. Catharines."

The project includes 560 retirement units spread out over the site, which sits at 155 Ontario St. near Montebello Park and backs onto Twelve Mile Creek.

It includes plans for a 140-unit seniors care residence, two 200-unit apartment buildings and 20 townhomes, according to a city report on community improvement plans, or CIPs, going to council Monday. That report says the estimated project costs are \$145 million.

The old hospital building would be torn down.

The Oakville-based company said in a press release Thursday the development will provide a range of care options for seniors, from independent living to assisted living.

No one from the company was available to speak Thursday.

"We are excited about the opportunity to create new homes for the senior population in St. Catharines," CEO Rick Smyth said in a statement.

"We are making a significant investment in downtown St. Catharines that will create numerous partnerships and bring essential services to meet the needs of an aging population."

The company expects to hire 100 full-time and part-time skilled workers for the retirement complex.

Seasons has a retirement residence on First Avenue in Welland, with residents coming from as far away as Port Colborne and St. Catharines.

Its other properties are in Amherstburg, Belle River, Bowmanville, Brantford, LaSalle, Milton, Owen Sound, Strathroy and Trenton.

The Ontario Street hospital site was closed in March 2013 with the opening of the new St. Catharines hospital on Fourth Avenue.

The Niagara Health System sold the property to Mountainview and Walker Industries prior to the move in 2006 for \$3 million. A clause in the sale allowed the NHS to stay on the land until its move.

The original idea was to build residences across the street from a townhouse development Mountainview and Walker built at the corner of Ontario Street and Welland Avenue.

Mike Watt, executive vice-president of Walker Industries, said Thursday they shifted their sights to seniors-focused housing and decided about a year and a half ago to look for a partner because of the size of the project.

He said a number of parties looked at re-adapting the hospital building, but the interior layout doesn't lend itself to what most developers want to do and it wasn't financially viable.

He said they settled on working with Seasons because it's a company that's been around a long time and has done projects all over the province. Mountainview-Walker is in the midst of selling the property to them.

"It's a fabulous location," Watt said. "A lot of amenities are within walking distance, and from a health-care perspective obviously the new hospital is very close by. There's the whole downtown and the redevelopment going on there. We all saw the opportunity that having that kind of housing downtown would have."

Sendzik said there will be a significant bump in tax revenue from the development — revenue that wasn't coming in when it was a hospital.

It will also create construction jobs needed in the community.

He said city staff have worked hard for the past year with Seasons to make the project happen.

"This is one of those announcements, they don't come along very often, and this is really an exciting time for St. Catharines," Sendzik said. "This shows we're investment-ready."

St. Patrick's Coun. Mark Elliott, whose ward includes the former Hotel Dieu site, said the development will be a great addition to the downtown, which is a community for everybody, not just youth.

He said it provides a needed residential component while filling a gap for seniors housing in the area.

“There’s a need for this type of thing, not only within the downtown but within our community,” he said. “Many of the retirement homes are quite full with quite long waiting lists. This is really needed in St. Catharines, especially with an aging community.”

Elliott and fellow ward councillor Mat Siscoe said residents in the area had previously said no to a police station and courthouse on the property, and wanted residential.

“This is what residents have been waiting for and looking for,” Siscoe said. “I think residents in the area are going to be very happy and very satisfied with the way this eventually came out.”

Siscoe said the city has been working toward getting the site developed for a number of years and it’s exciting to have a very serious proposal.

“I’m excited going forward that it’s going to help complete some of the work on Ontario Street and create that gateway to downtown we’ve been looking for for the last few years since Hotel Dieu closed.”

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