

Windsor/Essex offers affordable retirement

SUNSHINE from H1

of fleeing south of the border, they headed for the Canadian south, and plan to move there the next month or two.

It doesn't compare to Florida's subtropical conditions, but Simons is looking forward to living in a place with 223 days of "short-sleeve weather" — when the average temperature rises above 10C — and the growing season extends from April to the end of October.

Kingsville and Leamington are the two most southerly towns in Canada. They are on the same latitude as Northern California and lie southeast of Windsor in Essex, Canada's most southerly county. Hard-hit by layoffs in the automotive and related industries, Windsor/Essex is promoting itself as a haven for baby boomers looking for a place to retire or semi-retire.

Essex County boasts Ontario's longest summers, most moderate winters, plenty of golf, water sports and fishing, excellent birding, endless farmers' markets, big-name entertainment and proximity to the U.S. border.

It also has the most affordable real estate in Canada, according to a survey conducted by Re/Max in March 2009, which compared prices in 32 Canadian centres.

Mike Dinchik, executive officer of the Greater Windsor Home Builders' Association, coordinates a consortium that is promoting the region's charms, the Active Retirement Community Initiative (retire here.ca).

From Leamington in the southeast, around Lake Erie and up the Detroit River to Amherstburg, north to Windsor and then east along Lake St. Clair past Tecumseh and Belle River, the county offers 160 kilometres of waterfront living which is why, says Dinchik, they've dubbed Essex the "The 100 Mile Peninsula."

The Simons didn't know much about the region when they started checking out property last year. They soon learned they could pick up a two-bedroom, two-bathroom executive home with 100 feet of waterfront on Lake Erie in Kingsville for about \$430,000, while a compa-

COMPARISONS



GARY MAY PHOTO

This home in the Windsor/Essex area, priced at \$379,900, has 80 feet of waterfront on 195-foot-deep lot.

City with average resale home price/two-bed apartment monthly rental in Ontario:

Windsor: \$153,000 / \$748

London: \$211,386 / \$849

Barrie: \$273,296 / \$958

Ottawa: \$297,330 / \$995

Toronto: \$377,091 / \$1,093

Source: Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp. survey from spring, 2009

Some examples of waterfront properties recently offered in Windsor/Essex:

• Colchester: Two-bedroom, one-bath cottage with crawl space, used as an all-weather residence, \$149,000.

• Belle River: Home/cottage overlooking marina, sandy beach, dock, concrete wall, two-car ga-

rage, \$269,500.

• Windsor: Year-round three-bedroom, hardwood floors, gas fireplace, jetted tub, modern kitchen, steel breakwall, dock, deck, \$279,900.

• Belle River: Four-bedroom, three-bath, two gas fireplaces, hardwood and stone floors, steel breakwall and beach, \$499,900.

nable home on Lake Simcoe or Georgian Bay would be \$1 million or more, they figure. (Their home in Horseshoe Valley is offered for \$499,000.)

Such savings aren't limited to upper-end properties. Real estate agent Cindy Sorkopud with Royal LePage's offices in Windsor and Kingsville, says she deals with plenty of waterfront listings in the \$200,000 to \$400,000 range. For \$200,000 or less you can purchase a two-bedroom, one-bathroom cottage waiting for conversion to an all-season home likely in need of minor work. In the \$200,000 to \$300,000 range, she handles 1½ to two-storey, three-bedroom homes with two baths. Over that, she says, is an array of homes in "pristine" condition.

Phil Dörner, past-president of the Windsor-Essex County Real Estate Board, concurs with those figures and adds: "For \$400,000, you can get a waterfront house here that

would cost double that, at least, in Muskoka."

Dinchik says with figures like that, more escapes from the GTA are beginning to take notice. Many, he says, are driven by the depletion of their pension portfolios in last year's stock market carnage. "If you lost 30 per cent of your portfolio, you can sell your Toronto home for half a million, buy a nicer one here for \$350,000 and free up \$150,000 in capital for retirement."

The initiative began late last year with an ad campaign aimed at the GTA. Future targets will be other Ontario centres and Michigan. But savvy boomers were already beginning to take stock, says Sorkopud.

"These people really know what they're looking for," she says. "It's indicative of the 50-plus crowd that they've done their homework. They put 'good climate' and 'retire' into Google."

Sorkopud says at an open house she held on a recent Sunday she had

three couples visit from Toronto, all aged 55-plus and contemplating retirement.

"I've recently relocated people from Kapuskasing, Calgary, Edmonton and Toronto."

It was recognition of this trend, together with the rough local economic climate, that led to the initiative, says Dinchik. Has the organization been hobbled by negative notions of the Windsor region as an "industrial wasteland?" No, insists Dinchik. He says few people have any strong impressions, one way or the other.

The campaign plays up the area's amenities: Caesars Windsor Casino lands top-notch entertainment; there's plenty of golf and more weeks every year in which to enjoy it; Detroit is nearby and the large U.S. city offers professional hockey, baseball, basketball and football, as well as first-run entertainment; all that water means lots of fishing and water sports; Point Pelee National

Park is known as one of the best locations in Canada for birders; and respect for the Shores of Erie wine district is growing.

Dörner says the active retirement community initiative offers subsidized tours for anyone who wants to check the region out. Several hotels and motels provide 50 per cent discounts and plans are underway to include a discount card for golf, winery tours and restaurants, adds Dinchik.

He says last time he checked the website retirehere.ca, it had received 5,500 unique visits, 150 requested information packages had been mailed out and 31 tours had been conducted. While most inquiries have been from the GTA, some have come from as far away as Britain and the west coast of Canada and the U.S.

Adding to the inventory of homes is the fact that many Americans are selling their waterfront vacation homes because of the rising Canadian dollar and increased difficulties in crossing the border, says Dörner. However, Sorkopud says there's not a surfeit of waterfront properties and prices are bound to rise.

While Essex County's water has been a big draw for many outsiders, prospective buyers need to consider the negative factors too, says Ken Schmidt, general manager of the Essex Region Conservation Authority (ERCA). Schmidt advises prospective buyers to do their due diligence before buying.

Flooding occurred along lakes Erie and St. Clair from 1973-75, 1986, in the late 1990s and in 2004, he says. Breakwalls, armour stone and other types of erosion control have been constructed to limit future damage. Buyers should obtain all the information they can from real estate agents, then contact ERCA, which charges a fee to provide information on a property's flood history.

But shoppers should consider a professional engineer's report, even though it'll cost a lot more, he says.

"After all, this is a very large investment that's being contemplated. You want to know everything you can."

ETOBICOKE

History influences townhome designs

DIANE TIERNEY
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Charming beach houses of the late 1800s are the inspiration for the architecture at Saint Agnes' Square townhomes in the historical Long Branch area of south Etobicoke.

Ida Zan, vice-president of development for Queenscorp Developments, says the 20 townhomes will feature pitched roofs, corner turret details, large cornice mouldings and wraparound porches.

Building materials include antique brick, limestone accents and decorative metal details. Inviting front entrances have columned and covered porches with coach lamp lighting fixtures.

Saint Agnes' Square is adjacent to Saint Agnes' Church along the quiet side street of Marina Ave. at Long Branch Ave., south of Lake Shore Blvd. West.

Long Branch was once the site of the Villa Lots — a premium cottage development in the 19th century. The units at Saint Agnes' Square have been named after prominent 19th-century area residents.

Long Branch was featured in *Toronto Life's* March 2009 issue as one of Toronto's "Next Hot 'Hoods." The Long Branch neighbourhood is considered undervalued due to its waterfront proximity.

The townhomes range from 760 square feet to 1,275 square feet and are priced from about \$236,900 to \$374,900. Designs include one-bedroom plus den terrace flats, two-bedroom flats and two-storey, two-bedroom units.

All homes include a single garage and a balcony, terrace or large patio. Balconies and decks feature glass French doors, sidelights and transom windows.

There are nine-foot ceilings, plush broadloom, choice of ceramic or porcelain tile flooring, natural oak hand railings with white pickets and smooth finish ceilings.

Open-concept kitchens have custom-quality cabinets including extended 42-inch uppers, optional breakfast bar or island. There's a choice of hardwood flooring or granite counters. Energy Star white, black or stainless steel appliances are included as well as high efficiency, gas-fired, hot water furnace, air conditioning and natural gas barbecue hook-up.

Condo fees of \$188 per month cover exterior maintenance such as lawn care, snow removal, windows and roof maintenance. Professionally landscaped front yards have an underground irrigation system.

Long Branch offers picturesque parks, waterfront trails and vibrant



The 20 townhomes at Saint Agnes' Square range from 760 square feet to 1,275 square feet and are priced from about \$236,900 to \$374,900.

shopping including restaurants, pubs, cafes, professional services and family recreation areas.

Len Ford Park, Long Branch Park and Birch Park are within walking distance, as is Long Branch Centennial Arena. Marie Curtis Park is nearby, where the Cities of Toronto and Mississauga have joined efforts to the redevelop the area.

The 24-hour TTC streetcar line is nearby and the Long Branch GO

station is a five-minute walk west. Sherway Gardens and Dixie Outlet Mall are a five-minute drive away. The QEW, Gardiner Expressway and Highway 427 are close by.

The sales office is at 3609 Lake Shore Blvd. W., Ste. 104, Toronto. Hours are Monday to Thursday 3 p.m. to 7 p.m.; Friday by appointment; weekends and holidays noon to 6 p.m. Call 416-354-2221 or visit queenscorp.com.

First-time buyers driving market gains

The latest new home sales statistics arrived on my BlackBerry this week while I attended the annual conference of the Ontario Home Builders' Association in Niagara Falls.

These days, I'm always very curious to open that email to see if the positive market trend is holding, and new home sales in August did not disappoint.

According to RealNet Canada Inc., there were 3,074 new homes and condos sold in the Greater Toronto Area in August 2009. That's up a very healthy 62 per cent compared with August 2008.

A closer look at the numbers reveals that sales of new highrise condominium suites stabilized in August while sales of new lowrise (townhomes, semi- and single-detached) homes spiked.



STEPHEN DUPUIS

When I say that highrise sales stabilized, it's because the consistent downward trend in sales of those units was arrested, albeit very modestly, with a 2 per cent increase across the GTA and a 10 per cent increase in the key City of Toronto market.

When I say that lowrise spiked, I'm talking about a 163 per cent increase across the GTA with York and Peel Region sales up 224 and 252 per cent respectively.

As it happens, the new home market has been on a relative roll since May of this year, which leads us to ask two key questions: what's behind it? And can it last?

I attribute the surge in sales to homebuyers recognizing that home builders are offering some of the best prices they might ever see and seizing the opportunity. Frank Clayton, BILD's economic advisor, calls it "the exhilaration of a bargain," and I think he is right on.

First-time homebuyers are particularly active in the market, taking advantage of the combination of attractive prices and ultra-low interest rate. According to Shaun Hildebrand, senior market analyst with Canada Mortgage and Housing Corp., first-time buyers are driving demand this year to the tune of 57 per cent compared with

just 33 per cent last year. There's a big part of the answer.

The return of the first-time buyer is always a very healthy sign.

With all those first-time buyers, you might think that the condo market would be the beneficiary but given the perfect storm of lower prices and interest rates, many of those buyers are making their market entry with a new home in the 905 regions of the GTA.

Underscoring the shift in buyer preference, it's very interesting to note that total new home sales this year have been split 63 per cent lowrise, 37 per cent highrise. Last year, those numbers were 45 per cent lowrise and 55 per cent highrise. It's been a fairly dramatic turn of events as underscored by looking at year-to-date sales, which are up 11 per cent for lowrise

but down 42 per cent for highrise.

With eight months in the books, total new home sales are still running 18 per cent behind 2008, which was not exactly a banner year for the industry. This is a relative recovery at best, based totally on affordability.

As long as builders can continue to deliver affordable product to the market, the resurgence can continue. Builders have actively managed the costs they control and slashed margins to the bare minimum. Unfortunately, builders don't have control over ever-rising government-driven taxes, fees and levies, but that's a story for another day. Stephen Dupuis is president and CEO of the Building Industry and Land Development Association. The views expressed are those of the president. Email: president@bildgta.ca.