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Development that makes sense

“Old” Strathcona is often held up as a shining example of the economic and aesthetic benefits that can result from the preservation of a community’s historic character. Too much of the focus, however, has been confined to Whyte Avenue.

A recent attempt by one Strathcona business to win planning approval for a parking lot on a residential street north of Whyte Avenue has enormous implications for the long-term viability of the community.

While the parking lot was rejected, the request has forced city officials to consider measures to ensure further damage is not inflicted on residential streets already threatened by insensitive new housing development.

At the request of Ald. Michael Phair, the planning and development department is studying the feasibility of applying a development control “overlay” that would cover residential areas adjacent to Whyte Avenue.

While such new development controls would deal with the question of land use, Phair said the department is also looking at “the importance of history, and trying to find ways to keep or preserve some of the historical atmosphere of the area, and that would implicate design.”

Charlie Letourneau, president of Centennial Homes, is the model of the kind of developer needed to ensure the charac-



John
Geiger

The City

ter of the area is preserved, even enhanced.

Since 1990, Letourneau has built five new houses in Old Strathcona, homes that recapture the traditional virtues of Strathcona’s small town origins.

Each is designed by Letourneau not as a modernist statement, or to emulate suburbia, but to complement other houses on the block, an effect achieved through the use of wide verandas, gable ornaments, and even traditional facing methods, such as painted cedar shingles.

The result is utterly convincing. Centennial’s turreted house at 10122 86th Avenue, overlooking the Strathcona community league and King Edward School playground, might just as well have stood at the site for generations.

Of his houses, Letourneau says “people, if they haven’t seen the house being

built, quite often think it’s an older house that was fixed up.”

In fact, while they pay tribute to the best of Victorian and early 20th century design, down to such interior details as old-fashioned heat registers, and cast iron bathtubs reused from long-demolished homes, Letourneau’s houses are thoroughly contemporary.

Letourneau is a new breed of developer, not only because he also acts as designer and general contractor on each house he builds, but also because he wants more, not less, city control over infill development in the area.

A member of Old Strathcona’s design review committee, Letourneau laments the creeping intrusion of Riverbend-style “monoliths” into the community: “What’s happening is that they’re destroying the very character that first attracted them to the neighborhood.

“The type of development that is being allowed in Old Strathcona is no different than the rest of the city. There should be some special guidelines,” he said, acknowledging that some in his industry will see it as unwarranted government interference in the market.

Centennial Homes is proof that the market itself can produce developers with the sensitivity and imagination needed to ensure that the residential character of Old Strathcona is preserved. Strengthened guidelines would assist others in the industry to catch up.