

Nobody knows Mississauga's plans better than John

By JOHN STEWART
Staff

It was the mid-1970s, and Mississauga and its city centre at Burnhamthorpe Rd. and Hurontario St. were a planner's dream — a blank palette on which a masterpiece of urban design could potentially be painted.

Square One Shopping Centre had been built in 1973 and Mississauga development visionary Bruce McLaughlin had a scheme to surround it with four huge residential neighbourhoods: the Valleys, the Meadows, the Woods and the Forest.

Macklin Hancock, another Mississauga urban planning legend, had designed the new community of Erin Mills, improving on his previous concept of Don Mills. Peter Langer, of Markborough Properties, was building the new community of Meadowvale West in the far north-west corner of the city.

In mid-September 1974, the year in which the City of Mississauga was born, an eager young planner named John Calvert was hired as the 12th member of the fledgling municipal planning department.

He quickly became a favourite of Planning Commissioner Russ Edmunds, a dapper gentleman/planner whose speeches to his political masters were as well-cut and perfectly tailored as his immaculate suits.

"For some reason, Russ took me to all of his meetings to take notes," says Calvert, 66, who retired from his senior planning post with the City on Dec. 31, just shy of his 40th anniversary on the job. "I got to sit there and hear all the plans and see all the negotiations. It was the education of a lifetime."

Edmunds was a patient and understanding mentor and he saw something in Calvert that he clearly liked.

The young planner was chosen to work with IBI consultants on the development team for the first Official Plan, the critical overriding document that governs every significant aspect of development in the municipality.

When it came time to draft the



City of Mississauga Policy Planning Director John Calvert is retiring after a 40-year career with the city that he helped shape. The model on the 4th floor of the Civic Centre bears witness to completed projects and those still to come in our city centre.
Staff photo by Fred Loek

first plan for the city centre in 1980, it was Calvert who led the process. He also headed preparation of the first secondary plan for the community of Dixie-Shorefront, which served as a template for the many that followed.

The Burlington resident has shepherded several versions of both the Official Plan and the city centre plan through the long public review process that ends in approval by the Ontario Municipal Board.

No one knows more than Calvert about the City's Official Plan or the various revised city centre plans, which culminated in the recent Downtown 21 Plan.

"We're going to miss him," says Ward 9 Councillor Pat Saito with an audible sigh of regret. "He has all of that historical knowledge that's irreplaceable, not just about what happened, but about why things happened. That is just so helpful. He was a great resource and support person for all of us."

Planning Commissioner Ed Sajecki says Calvert "has a ton of corporate memory. He's really seen it all, from the greenfields development

until today."

One of the keys to his success is the planner's "collaborative" nature, says Sajecki. "He has a very calming influence on people. He could see the different sides of an issue."

Calvert's greatest challenge has been the city centre.

The layer of shale that underlies the downtown core also undermined the City's ambitious hopes of easily attracting prestige commercial office towers to the area.

Because underground parking was required and drilling to install it was so expensive because of the shale, much-desired tenants, such as RBC,

moved into the Meadowvale financial district and other outlying areas where cheaper surface parking was abundant.

Things got more complicated when the City made a couple of strategic "mistakes" in its third version of the downtown plan, says Calvert. It eliminated height and density restrictions and pre-zoned many properties to encourage quick development action.

All the action happened on the residential side, however, without the desired balance of office commercial development.

The first downtown concept also

included major swaths of parkland which never materialized. While the LRT/BRT transit connection is coming to fruition, the major pedestrian connection through the heart of the centre is still just a proposal.

And the key concept of creating a line of prestige head office towers between Rathburn Rd. and Hwy. 403 never materialized at all. The towers of power the City envisioned were, instead, replaced with "temporary" entertainment zonings, which persist to this day.

"We would really like to see more intense uses there, not a go-track cart and batting cages," says Calvert.

But all is not lost yet.

One day, Calvert points out, Mississauga could be in the enviable position of being one of the last places in the GTA able to offer first-class office tower accommodation in the heart of a built-out city centre.

Ever the optimist, he says that will be possible when it becomes economical to build underground parking — or when the City bites the bullet and provides some of that parking itself.

Calvert helped oversee the transition of Mississauga from its agrarian roots to the sixth-largest urban centre in the country, and said it's been a long and rewarding career, watching Mississauga roll out before his eyes under guidelines that he and the City's planning team carefully put in place, says Calvert.

"There were thousands of empty acres of land that we released for development," he says. "It was almost like an academic exercise — but it was reality."