

Barrhaven business park hunting for world-class occupant

BY DAVID REEVELY, OTTAWA CITIZEN MAY 28, 2013

A new business park for Barrhaven

A 100-hectare business park was approved by city council's planning committee Tuesday, in the hope that it will attract a major tech company and thousands of high-end jobs to the southwest suburb.



Source: City of Ottawa

ROBERT CROSS /OTTAWA CITIZEN

A 100-hectare business park was approved by city council's planning committee May 18, 2013.

Photograph by: Robert Cross, Ottawa Citizen

OTTAWA — A new “prestige business park” city council's planning committee approved for Barrhaven Tuesday will juice the southern suburb's economy and complete it as a community, its councillor says.

Just as soon as somebody can find a marquee occupant.

“This is the most valuable employment land in the whole city of Ottawa, and we need to get it ready,” said Barrhaven Coun. Jan Harder of the property southeast of the interchange between Highway 416 and Strandherd Road, which is now mostly scrub. “It is, in my mind, THE game-changer for the area.”

The work of preserving a woodlot on the land and devising a drainage plan has taken years of research and negotiations. If city council approves it next week, the new plan includes 12-storey buildings overlooking the interchange and nine-storey ones running south along the highway, top-notch office space meant to attract top-notch employers. Ten thousand jobs in all, if everything goes according to plan.

Barrhaven has had disappointments with such efforts before. In the late 1990s, this piece of land was supposed to hold a regional headquarters for Nortel, augmenting or replacing its crystal palace on Corkstown Road.

“Within six months, they collapsed. They went from ‘We want to move from that mansion into this mansion’ to ‘We’re nowhere,’” Harder said.

The former JDS Uniphase complex at the south end of Merivale Road is becoming a new headquarters for the RCMP and that's good news for south Nepean — but not as good as when JDS was going to be the region's second-biggest employer, right before the tech bubble burst.

There's no Nortel or JDS ready to move in, at least not yet. The first things to be built in the business park will be less prestigious: an auto mall and a retail plaza. The shops are meant to serve Barrhavenites and make the property more enticing to higher-end tenants, said David Kardish of the Regional Group, which owns most of the land.

"We hope to be in the ground with two major components of the first stage in 2015," Kardish said.

Then comes the hard part: Finding a big, high-end company that wants a big, high-end space.

"It's a tough sell," Kardish said bluntly. "The office market in Ottawa has highs and lows. And right now, there's not a lot going on." Regional Group has had some interest from mid-sized companies and talked with high-tech company Ciena about a development of about 250,000 square feet a few years ago, he said, but that fell through.

"It was very difficult because we couldn't give them a timeline," Kardish said. Once city council's approval is in hand, he can hit the market more confidently.

An unscientific survey the city is using to guide an overhaul of its official land-use plan found that only three per cent of more than 4,200 respondents would choose to work in a business park, given their druthers. But 47 per cent said they'd like to work "in (their) community," and that's what a big Barrhaven office park is supposed to offer.

Anyway, said Harder, the Strandherd property isn't to be just any business park. "In this case, you're going to have a nice product that's going to be as nice as the nicest ones in Kanata," she said. Most Ottawa business parks are defined by light industry, which is necessary but unglamorous and not what most world-class companies want to be next to.

Instead, the idea is to create a "campus" with that big-name occupant and numerous affiliated companies in the same industry, she said, possibly something related to green technology.

There's the beginning of a "green-tech corridor" roughly following the 416, Harder pointed out, beginning with the agriculture college in Kemptville and including Plasco Energy Group, a methane operation at the city's Trail Road landfill, a solar farm and a major new outpost Hydro Ottawa plans to build. On the west side of the highway, Harder said, the land is protected for agriculture but could include some related research facilities without running afoul of the law.

The word "protected" comes up a lot in these discussions: From Barrhaven to Orléans, the city is keen to "protect" land designated for offices or elite manufacturing from lesser uses. Harder calls them "easy pickings," tenants or buyers that a developer like Regional Group would bring in because, well, they're offering money and ready to go.

"First, it's the Frito-Lay plant," she said. "Then once that's in place, PNG, Procter & Gamble comes in and they want a warehouse, and they say, well, we can put it here next to the Frito-Lay plant and doesn't that make sense? And before you know it, you have the kind of regular business park that people don't like."

Kardish said Regional Group is as eager as anyone for a big-name occupant and will be working with the city's economic-development agency Invest Ottawa to find one. But it owns a lot of property and, above all, wants to do something with it.

"The sooner we can develop it or sell it, the better we'll be," he said.