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Downtown real estate warming to geothermal energy

City Journal reporter Jim Donnelly launches an occasional series investigating the development of new green-friendly downtown properties

**Greening
the Core**
Jim Donnelly



It was an innocent-looking sign, but it ended up proving a major headache for a downtown development aimed at energy-conscious urban living.

"It was the geothermal company that put it up," explained Ecocité's Cheryl Gladu of the yellow-and-black "free heat" sign posted along the fence at their "green" condo development at Bank and Wilton Streets.

The four-storey future structure will employ, among other sustainable features, a geothermal heating system that utilizes the earth's natural heat without burning fossil fuels. But the sign boasting "free heat" was recently taken down.

"It was a bit deceiving," said Gladu, adding that they'd had some disagreements with potential customers over its message. "The heat is free, but the mechanical system that extracts the heat isn't free."

But Ottawa's Earth Energy Solutions, who installed the geothermal system and the sign, said it's just part of their marketing strategy.

"I can understand how that would be a bit of a conflict (in customers' minds)," said the company's marketing director, Dan Gibson. "But we also use the slogan 'We drill, you strike it rich' and no one's going to be getting gold in their pockets. It's part of our marketing plan. We use that all the time."

The system will be financed over a 10 year period through the building's condo fees — \$150 per month for smaller units, \$300 for mezzanines and \$500 for penthouses.

Royal LePage Performance Realty's Lyse Freeborn, who is pre-selling the development, agreed with Gladu. "Let's stay on the high road and say heat will be delivered in a responsible, economical and clean manner and it'll be worked into the condo fee," she said.

Dealing with conflicting messages and odd financing arrangements are just some of the challenges facing geothermal developers, according to Bill Eggerston, executive director of the Earth Energy Society. They're a lobby group representing the geothermal industry.

Eggerston said in the past, low-energy prices have made green heating sources a tough sell. "But as energy prices rise, we start looking absolutely wonderful. Also, our systems can reduce emissions by anywhere from five to seven tons per household, depending on what it is you're actually competing against. Obviously the dirtier your energy sources, the cleaner we are."

Geothermal heating and cooling systems take advantage of warmth stored within the earth's crust, and typically are designed using closed or open-loop systems involving pipes thrust into the earth, which pull energy upward.

It provides heat in the winter, cool air in the summer and hot water all year round. The main upside, other than its favourable ecological footprint, is a next-to-zero operating cost once installation costs are paid down.

The building itself, which will boast proximity to the Glebe and hospitable canal views, promises to be a masterpiece of green development designed by award-winning local architect Christopher Simmonds. Aside from geothermal heating and cooling it will feature energy-efficient windows, individual unit ventilation, and non-toxic building materials.

While smaller units are sold out, mezzanines start at \$255,000 and penthouses at \$465,000 ranging to \$640,000 for a 1,646 square foot Penthouse EcoCondo.

"You know when you walk into an apartment building and you walk down the hallway and someone's having fish, and the other one's having curry, and the other one's having spaghetti?" said Freeborn. "That's not the way it is here. There's no pressurized hallways. So if you have any kind of environmental sensitivity, this protects you from that."

And though the building is almost 70 per cent sold, Freeborn said it was difficult for the inexperienced development company to



SELLING GREEN: Real estate agent Lyse Freeborn says the geothermal heating and cooling system planned for a new downtown development will deliver heat in a clean, responsible and economic manner. Photo by Darren Brown

initially obtain financing for the project.

According to Freeborn, that's because green building techniques are both expensive and different. "Anything that isn't slap-it-up-quick and make it quick and dirty is not what people go for. Builders, particularly."

Perhaps the most notable development in the Ottawa area utilizing the technology is the Museum of Civilization, the Douglas Cardinal-designed structure in Gatineau

built in 1989.

Ecocité is a Montréal company started by Stittsville's Christopher Sweetnam-Hobbes and Cheryl Gladu. The two met at Carleton University and, a few years later, started the business as a sustainable development company.

They've got one development under their belts at Point St. Charles in Montréal, and have other projects running in B.C. and Montréal. ecocite.ca