

# Directions for New Urban Neighbourhoods: Learning from St. Lawrence

## The City of Toronto

*In the cycle of urban growth, development, and decay, cities in the post-war era have strived to renew and revitalize their downtown cores. Toronto's St. Lawrence neighbourhood was developed in the 1970s under similar conditions as an adaptive reuse of the former industrial lands near the lakeshore. The intent was to build a community from the ground up, while providing a combination of affordable housing to attract new residents. This case examines the public planning and consultation process that has resulted in the evolution of one of Canada's most dynamic inner-city neighbourhoods.*

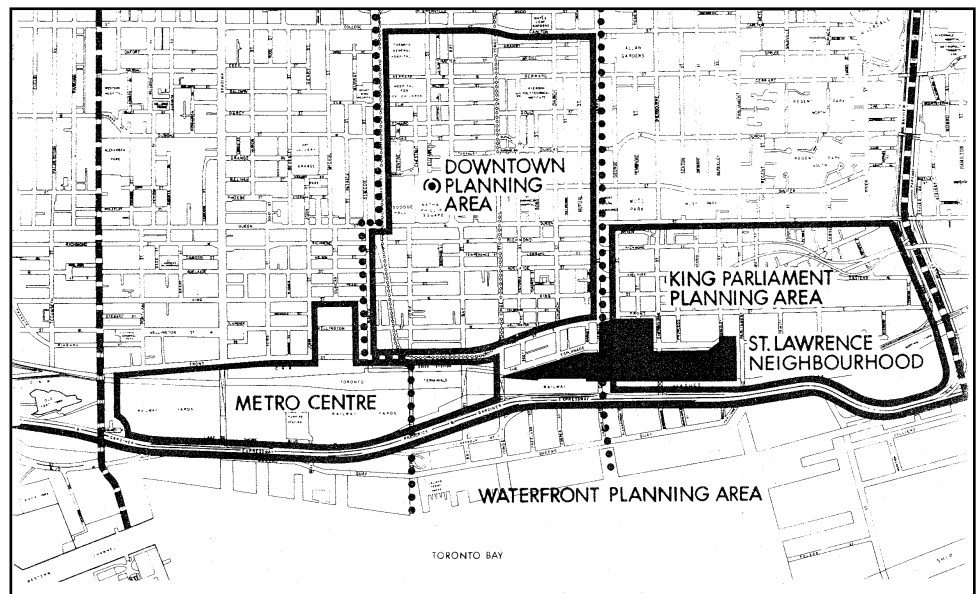


Figure 1: The St. Lawrence Site

### Background

The St. Lawrence neighbourhood is a high density, socially mixed community in the centre of downtown Toronto. Built to provide affordable downtown housing, a total of 4,310 units on 56 acres of land houses approximately 10,000 people. It is seen as one of the better municipally organized inner-city redevelopments in Canada. It is also an excellent example of how the public sector, in cooperation with the private sector, can work together to develop a successful new community.

The St. Lawrence neighbourhood was initiated as a response to the changes made in federal, provincial, and municipal housing policies in the early 1970s. The federal government's National Housing Act was revised to reflect the shift in federal policy from urban renewal and public housing to new neighbourhoods containing mixed income, non-profit housing. New programs such as the Neighbourhood Improvement Program and Land Banking Program promoted the revitalization of existing neighbourhoods and the provision of housing for those with moderate to low incomes. Similar changes in provincial policy had resulted in greater municipal control over new housing development. The Provincial Government wanted out of the business

of building high-rise public housing and revised their housing policies to encourage municipalities to undertake housing development provided they plan, develop, and manage any new activity.

The political context for St. Lawrence was set by the 1972 civic elections, where a loose coalition of urban reformers led by Mayor David Crombie won control of City Council. The reformers' political base was in neighbourhood groups adamantly opposed to public or private urban renewal schemes. Several of the neighbourhood organizations were also involved in community-sponsored non-profit housing proposals.

The City of Toronto was experiencing a housing crisis in the early 1970s as a result of low housing starts and vacancy rates. Consequently, households with moderate to low incomes could not find affordable rental housing in the central city. Many moved to less expensive rental housing in municipalities outside of Toronto only to exacerbate the City's already declining population. Faced with a shortage of affordable housing, Toronto's City Council created a Housing Work Group to study the problem and develop home and land banking programs which would enable the City to take advantage of the changes made in federal and provincial housing policies. The Housing Work Group included Michael Dennis, Mayor Crombie's advisor on housing issues. Dennis, a lawyer from a prominent Bay Street firm, had written a 1972 report to Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation (CMHC) which was a catalyst for the change in federal housing policy. The group also included Howard Cohen, a young architect planner who had recently completed the controversial Trefann Court Plan, which rejected urban renewal for community-based neighbourhood revitalization. The Working Group recommended to city council that they

get back into the housing business through the creation of a new housing department and that they assume the role of provider, facilitator, and coordinator of new housing activity in the central city.

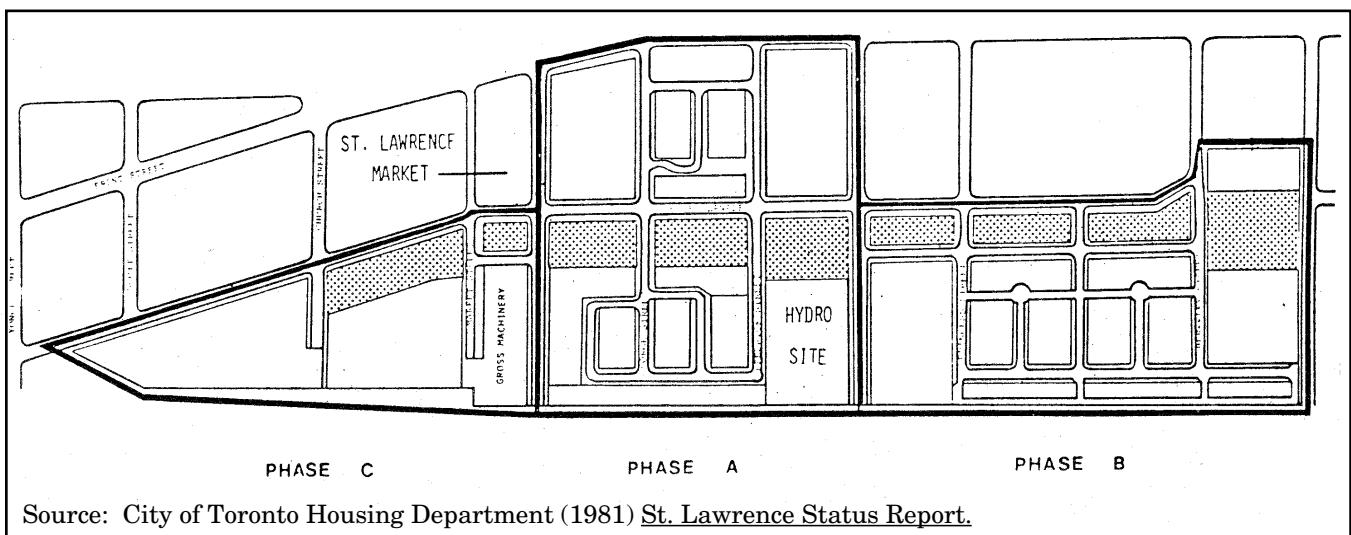
The Housing Work Group's 1973 report 'Living Room' was adopted as the City's housing policy and recommended that a site for a new housing development be found in order to qualify for loans under the Federal Government's Land Banking Program. The St. Lawrence site, an industrial district to the east of the downtown core, was identified as the location for the city's first land banking project.

The 'Living Room' report also outlined the development strategies used by the City to initiate the new housing development named St. Lawrence. First, the cost of assembling the land was not based on subsidies from the City but on the money recovered through the sale and leasing of land to private developers. In order to secure funds under the federal and provincial non-profit housing programs, the City chose to provide non-profit housing. This relieved the City of having to manage much of the housing after it was completed. Finally, the 'Living Room' report stated that citizens be involved from the beginning stages of planning and developing the St. Lawrence neighbourhood.

### Planning Goals

The goals of the St. Lawrence neighbourhood were:

1. to provide housing for all income groups, in particular families with moderate to low household incomes,
2. to increase the supply of housing in the central city,
3. to develop the new community according to sound planning principles,



Source: City of Toronto Housing Department (1981) St. Lawrence Status Report.

Figure 2: The development phases for St. Lawrence

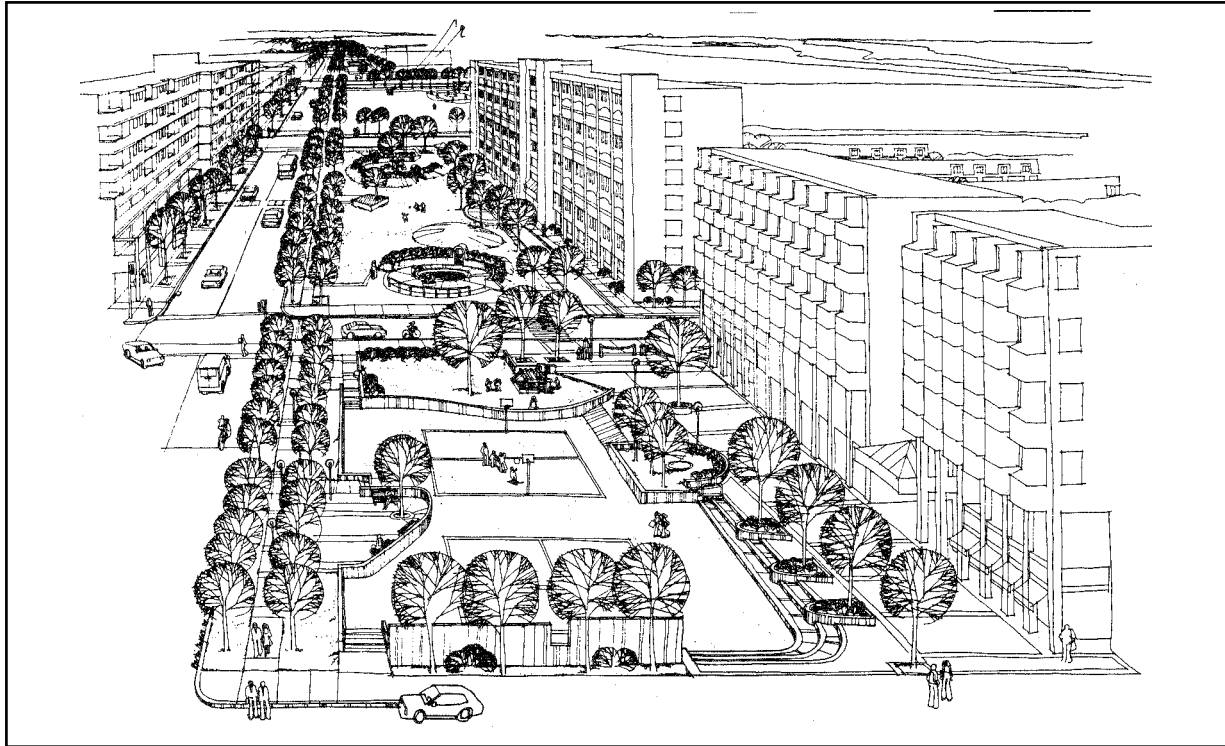


Figure 3: Crombie Park, the centre and heart of the St. Lawrence neighbourhood.

4. to restore the character of the Old Town of York by integrating the existing neighbourhood and historical buildings with the St. Lawrence neighbourhood,
5. to prevent the building of a typical public housing project.

Previous large public housing projects provided living arrangements for one income group, often those on social assistance, thus creating a public housing ‘ghetto’. The importance of disassociating St. Lawrence from the perception of being traditional public housing is best captured by Jane Jacobs. Jacobs responded to an architect who referred to it as a project: “Don’t do that! Don’t say project . . . the way you think about it will determine what you do.”

### The Site

St. Lawrence was built on 56 acres of under-utilized industrial lands. The site stretches between Yonge and Parliament Street and between Front Street and the railway embankment. It was previously used for parking, warehousing, scrap yards, and truck depots. To the west of the site is the City’s central business district (CBD). To the east is an industrial district and to the north the area consists of residential, commercial, and light industrial uses. The historic St. Lawrence Market, St. Lawrence Hall, and the St. Lawrence Centre for Performing Arts are located in the adjacent area. The St. Lawrence neighbourhood is within walking distance

to downtown shopping, employment, and entertainment, waterfront recreation, cultural facilities, schools, hospitals, and public transit.

St. Lawrence was chosen as the site for a new integrated downtown neighbourhood, despite its proximity to transportation corridors and the presence of airborne pollutants from nearby industrial activity. The site was chosen for the following reasons: first, it is immediately adjacent to the downtown; second, the conversion of industrial land for residential purposes caused only minimal disruption to the City’s employment base; third, the cost of the land was reasonable; and finally, with half of the land in the hands of the public sector it was easy to assemble all the site.

### Design & Planning Issues

During the 1970s, Modern planning principles that created large new suburbs on the outskirts of Toronto were rejected in favor of traditional town planning principles. This transition was reflected in a number of events taking place at the time and which subsequently influenced the design of the St. Lawrence project.

Many young middle-class professionals rejected suburban living and instead bought and renovated older homes in downtown Toronto. These new middle-class residents helped elect the reform city council. The preservation of Toronto’s traditional city neighbourhoods was at the top of their agenda. This enthusiasm



*Figure 4: Toronto's traditional street system as seen by this street in St. Lawrence.*

for preservation was seen in the successful revitalization of older inner-city neighbourhoods such as the Annex, Cabbagetown, Riverdale, and High Park.

After revitalizing inner-city neighbourhoods, the new middle class demanded that urban design considerations become an important aspect in the development of new downtown communities. In addition, members of the community were to be involved in the adoption of design guidelines, which was a reflection of the movement toward greater public participation in all stages of the planning process.

In St. Lawrence, the City wanted to avoid the mistakes made with Regent Park and St. James Town where land was assembled, cleared, and large high rise social housing was built. The planning process was open and democratic, encouraging community participation, and avoiding the closed and government imposed approach of the past. Working committees were established to create a vision for the type of neighbourhood St. Lawrence was to be. Their vision was to build a neighbourhood that was affordable, centrally located, designed for families, and controlled by its residents.

The community participation process was the key to designing the St. Lawrence neighbourhood. The citizen's working committee, which included representatives from community groups, public housing projects, non-profit cooperative housing, and the private development industry as well as the planners and councilors from the wards affected, established urban design principles and guidelines for the St. Lawrence development. The following were the site planning principles: first, the existing Toronto street grid was extended to St. Lawrence; second, the streets formed the basic infrastructure; and finally, in order to encourage human activity the public realm was related to grade.

The design of St. Lawrence retains the character and scale of the surrounding neighbourhoods. The roads were an extension of Toronto's nineteenth century street pattern and the buildings were built along the street so as to recreate the streetscape of the Old Town of York and encourage street related activity.

The central park along the Esplanade is linked by a tree-lined public promenade. It accommodates many uses and serves as the community focal point and school playground. The park links the north and south portions of the community and provides an internal circulation via the east-west pedestrian walkway to all parts of St. Lawrence. The park

also serves the residents of the surrounding areas.

Typical of neighbourhoods in downtown Toronto, housing in the St. Lawrence reflects differences in income, social class, age, and household size. For example, housing has been provided for single persons, couples, families with children, and senior citizens. It also consists of a mix of tenure type: 39% of the total units are condominium apartments, 30% are non-profit co-ops and private non-profit rentals, 27% are municipal non-profits rentals and 4% are ownership townhouses.

Three storey family townhouses are found on north-south tree-lined interior roads providing families with an address on a local street. They are surrounded by medium rise seven to ten storey apartments that serve as a buffer to reduce noise from the main traffic south of the neighbourhood. Community facilities such as schools, health clinics, grocery stores, hairdressers, cleaners, a recreation centre, and restaurants are located in the apartments at grade level facing main streets.

The planning approach was based on a number of comprehensive planning studies undertaken in order to determine the goals, development strategies, and the identification of any potential constraints. The initial environmental studies focused upon noise and vibration issues. The soil analyses were relatively simple by the standards of the 1990s for polluted industrial lands. In contrast, the physical planning and urban design were quite sophisticated and detailed. The overall site plan was presented as a poster containing an aerial perspective which is remarkably close to the appearance of the neighbourhood today.

The working committee and planning team went beyond urban design issues to prepare a plan for neighbourhood

social services. They were determined to have a wide range of services available in the first phase, including two elementary schools, a health clinic, shops, a restaurant, and a health club. To ensure that the services were available, they were all incorporated into one mixed use complex developed by the City Housing Department itself. The negotiations needed to develop this building were more complicated than the architecture, and the project manager for the City went on to negotiate leases for office buildings in Manhattan later in his career. The community services opened only a year after the first buildings were occupied, but the neighbourhood had to wait over a decade for its community centre and second public school.

## Actors and Stakeholders

A number of different developers and architects were involved throughout the 3 phases of developing the St. Lawrence community. A total of 16 different developers and 25 different architects provided diversity in building form as a result of different interpretations of the design guidelines. Allowing many developers to build on small portions of the site prevented uniformity, a continuous repetition of buildings and the project atmosphere associated with single developer development. The City of Toronto's Housing Corporation and the Metro Toronto Housing Authority, in addition to private developers, also participated.

## St. Lawrence: Cost / Revenue Projections to 1989

### Cost

Acquisition	\$28,000,000 (66%)
Development	6,000,000 (14%)
Consultants	1,700,000 (4%)
Administration	900,000 (2%)
Carrying Costs	6,000,000 (14%)

**Total** **\$43,100,000**

### Revenues

Recoveries from sales, leases, JV's	\$60,000,000
Grants	1,372,100
Miscellaneous	163,124

**Projected Balance** **\$18,435,224**

*source: Peddie, 1989*

## Financing & Development Process

The City's Housing Department had wasted little time in acquiring and assembling the 56 acres of land needed to build the St. Lawrence. Approval was given in 1973 to begin assembling the land and by 1975 it was completed. Assembling the land went smoothly. The private

owners were happy to receive market value for little used industrial land. More than half of the site was already owned by the public sector. These owners proved harder to remove, since they demanded replacement facilities. They were eventually relocated. Approximately 28 acres were held by the public sector, another 16 acres were purchased at market value from private land owners, and the remaining 12 acres were acquired by expropriation. The site was then cleaned of the high levels of toxicity derived from the site's previous uses.

The project was feasible because the City had access to federal and provincial government subsidies and loans to finance the development of St. Lawrence. As the public sector developer, the City of Toronto's Housing Department was given a 25 year mortgage by the Federal Government's Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to finance the acquisition, and assemble the land, in addition to the grants received under the Community Services Contribution Program and Federal Housing Action Program. Under the Ontario Housing Action Program the Provincial Government provided interest-free loans. More importantly, the City retained the title of the land. The building of St. Lawrence became self-financing as land was sold and leased to the private sector. The revenues were used to underwrite the cost of producing the community infrastructure and the non-profit and co-op buildings.

St. Lawrence was built in three phases. Phase A, which set the tone and character of the neighbourhood, began from the centre, where 1,596 units were built between Jarvis and Sherbourne Street. Construction began in Phase A because the planners felt it would be easiest to extend the existing fabric of the City. Another 1,278 units were built in Phase B between Sherbourne and Parliament Street in the early 1980's. However, phase C was stalled for over a decade and only one third of its buildings were completed in the mid 1990s, two decades after the project started.

## Public Sector Role

St. Lawrence was initiated, planned, and implemented by the City of Toronto Housing Department, in cooperation with the Federal and Provincial governments, the private sector, and the community. David Hulchanski noted that St. Lawrence was planned by three groups of "planners"; the professional planners, the decision makers, and the community organizations.

The professional planners included planners and architects from the City's Housing Department and Planning Board. The decision makers consisted primarily of city councilors and some senior municipal staff. Their role was to guide the development, ensure that sufficient affordable housing was created, and that the development goals were met. The final group of "planners" were the community organizations who influenced the

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councilors and planners as to how and what was expected of the St. Lawrence development from the public's perspective. They were also involved in the planning, designing, and implementation of St. Lawrence.

The Federal Government also played a significant role in the development of St. Lawrence. They created land-banking and non-profit housing programs which provided the financing and legislative mandate to make St. Lawrence a reality. The Province of Ontario played a minor role by providing no-interest loans and subsidies.

### **Private and Third Sector Roles**

The private sector was responsible for building the individual private and cooperative housing projects in the St. Lawrence neighbourhood. They were responsible for the design of the housing, financing, and construction of their own housing projects. They also played a role in the site plan process through participation in the citizen's working committee.

Non profit housing organizations developed 70% of the housing in the first two phases, and 52% of the housing overall. However, the City Housing Department was careful to include a condominium apartment project in the first group of buildings to make a statement that St. Lawrence was to be a mixed income neighbourhood. When the private market recovered in the 1980s, several other sites were developed by private builders, and the ledges of the neighbourhood were later redeveloped by private companies. The City Housing Department developed design guidelines and selected private and non-profit developers via a single-stage request for proposals (RFP) process.

### **Significant Dates in the Development of St. Lawrence**

*Dec. 1972 — urban reformers led by David Crombie are elected to Toronto's City Council.*

*Dec. 1973 — City adopts home and land banking policies from the Living Room Report.*

*May 1974 — St. Lawrence site is chosen for City's first land banking scheme.*

*Sept. 1975 — Part 1 of Official Plan is approved for St. Lawrence.*

*May 1976 — City Council adopts St. Lawrence Official Plan proposals.*

*Aug. 1977 — CMHC issues \$25M loan to the City's Housing Dept. and construction of Phase A begins in September.*

*June 1979 — Occupancy of first units in Phase A.*

*April 1982 — Residents began moving into Phase B units and Phase A is completed.*

*Summer 1992 - Community centre and public school completed.*

### **Experience Gained**

Large scale development such as St. Lawrence requires strong leadership to complete the project. Michael Dennis, the City's Commissioner of Housing, planner Howard Cohen, and alderman Michael Goldrick provided this leadership and demonstrated that politicians and bureaucrats can work together. For example, they coordinated and resolved conflicts among the actors involved: regulatory and funding agencies, government landowners, community groups, school boards, private landowners, and developers. Three additional features of the development of St. Lawrence stand out as the keys to its success.

First, the site plan adopted Toronto's nineteenth century grid street plan, resulting in a community that is integrated with its surroundings. The plan created a sense of continuity in physical form and a sense of belonging for residents. Today, the St. Lawrence neighbourhood is referred to as the community downtown that has always been there.

As a result of the social planning process, social goals were translated into the development of a successful community of mixed incomes, ages, and social classes. St. Lawrence avoided high rise apartment projects exclusively geared to residents below the poverty line.

Finally, the planning process was important to the development of St. Lawrence. The cooperatives and non-profit developers allowed user input into the planning process at a very early stage. The democratic nature of the process avoided many previous mistakes.

On the negative side, the early design review process pushed a single variety of red brick that led to a somewhat monotonous appearance in the first building groups. Later, project architects were given more freedom in choosing materials, with generally positive results. While St. Lawrence contains little outstanding architecture, the design guidelines prevented any major urban mistakes. The best buildings are probably the adaptive re-use of the older structures on the edge of the neighbourhood.

Community services were also a problem, despite the effort to obtain facilities in the first phase. St. Lawrence had to wait at the back of the line for a new school and community centre, behind established neighbourhoods with long standing claims. Finally, the proportion of rent-geared to income units has been gradually increasing in the non-profit buildings due to long waiting lists and pressure to target public subsidies to the most needy families. Regent Park was originally a mixed income neighbourhood, but it slowly became a stigmatized public housing project for exactly the same reasons. Will St. Lawrence follow its pattern? Probably not, because the condominium buildings and cooperatives will likely al-

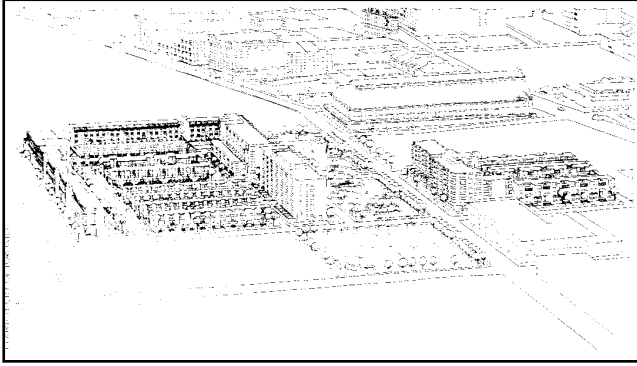


Figure 7: This figure shows the St. Lawrence neighbourhood in the context of the surrounding area. The key to integrating the neighbourhood with its surroundings was the adoption of Toronto's existing street grid system.

ways be home to many middle income families. The diversity which was a central theme of the planning for St. Lawrence should help it adapt to the future.

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