

## Downtown towers may strain sight lines to Parliament Hill

Some planning experts call for a 2nd look at the protected view planes in light of tall buildings

By Joanne Chianello, [CBC News](#) Posted: Jan 24, 2017 5:30 AM ET Last Updated: Jan 24, 2017 5:30 AM ET

When plans by Claridge Homes to develop the eastern portion of LeBreton Flats went to city's urban design review panel earlier this month, the feedback was unanimous: the park system is a great idea, but the 55-storey condo tower is too tall.

The planners and architects on the panel were concerned the building's height wasn't just out of scale with its surroundings, but would threaten to distract from what should be the key view from the area — Parliament Hill.

- [Urban design review panel balks at 55-storey condo proposed for LeBreton](#)

'Why do we have these viewpoints? To recognize we have a very special place here.' -  
*Robert Allsopp*

The Claridge proposal is only in its preliminary stages, but the mere prospect of such a tall structure at the Flats is leading some experts to call for a review of all the protected sight lines to Parliament Hill — policies that haven't had a major overhaul since they were first established 20 years ago.

## 'The image that sells Ottawa'

Robert Allsopp is a partner at the storied design and architecture firm DTAH. In the 1990s he helped the National Capital Commission establish 21 viewpoints across the capital region from which the Parliament Hill must be seen.

"Why do we have these viewpoints? To recognize we have a very special place here," he said in a recent interview.

The sight of Centre Block, with the Canadian flag fluttering at the tip of the Peace Tower, is the iconic symbol of democracy in Canada.

"That's the image that sells Ottawa," said Allsopp. "This is a national, iconic place. We have to be careful how we develop around it."

## Protected views established in 1990s

The recognition that the view of Parliament Hill is special and needs protection is not new. There were rules to limit the height of downtown Ottawa buildings to 10 storeys from the early 20th century. This sort of blanket height restriction was in place in other capitals such as Washington, London and Paris.

But in the late 1960s, developer Robert Campeau fought those restrictions, ultimately taking his argument to the Ontario Municipal Panel, which allowed Place de Ville to be built. The downtown

complex, spanning two blocks and soaring at more than double the existing height limits, was a massive development in Ottawa for its time.

The approval to build it from the OMB — a quasi-judicial board that is still allowed to overturn council decisions in city planning matters — set a precedent for taller buildings downtown. Over the subsequent years, more development applications that exceeded the height limit were filed.

But it wasn't until the 1990s that officials got serious about doing something about it.

The National Capital Commission produced a video called "A Vanishing Symbol," using relatively new computer-modelling technology to show how the growth in the city was crowding out view of Parliament Hill. The video helped to raise public awareness and support for a new way of restricting heights in the core.

Working with the city and consultants, the NCC identified 21 specific spots in the city from which you must be able to see a number of "national symbols", although Centre Block is the key protected view in most cases.

How specific? Very. Spots include:

- The half-way point of the Prince of Wales Bridge.
- Sussex Drive, 76.5 metres south of the Macdonald-Cartier Bridge.
- The corner of York Street and Sussex.

Because these views were included in the city's official plan in the late 1990s, they are legally protected. In 2008, the city added two more protected views from Beechwood Cemetery: one at the Tommy Douglas memorial, and another at Poet's Hill.

## **No major review for 2 decades**

As taller and taller buildings go up around the city, some of those protected views are getting squeezed. Developers are careful not to impede the views — and are required to provide pictures that show their buildings don't block our vistas — but some worry intensification is crowding and cluttering those views.

For example, when Domicile was planning a 10-storey condo for Beechwood Avenue, some criticized the building for coming right to the edge of the protected view of the Hill from the cemetery. While in accordance with the rules, some felt the building didn't follow the "spirit" of the policy.

And now, tall towers are planned for the edges of downtown. Just west of Claridge's possible 55-storey building, Trinity Properties has applied for three 50-storey-plus towers. And then there are the intensification plans for LeBreton west of Booth, which the NCC is negotiating with the Senators-backed consortium, Rendez-Vous LeBreton.

No one disputes the need for more density in the core, especially near light-rail stations. But some experts believe that the new heights, which were not really contemplated when the protected-view policy was conceived in the late 1990s, call for a comprehensive second look.

## **Tall towers not foreseen**

"I don't think anyone, historically, expected buildings of 55 storeys here — that wasn't really considered in terms of how people thought of LeBreton," said David Leinster, a Toronto-based planner who chairs Ottawa's design review panel.

"I do have concerns with the views that were shown, that the height may compromise some of those views."

And, he added, no one envisioned development on the islands right in the centre of the Ottawa River. Indeed, the need to review the policy to protect views came up again during discussions over the Zibi plans for Chaudière Island.

In the case of the Claridge proposal, the panel felt the size of the tower took away from the focus of nearby national sites, including the Canadian War Museum, the Ottawa River and even Parliament Hill itself. And the panel worries that future development, especially west of downtown, will also compromise views of all those national symbols.

"We have to rethink the viewplanes," argued Allsop. "I do think we need to be a bit more careful."

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