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Baby makes three for CTV newsmen and his fiancée. **K19**

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Full disclosure is best when sellers sign the paperwork. **K2**



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Lake views set the stage at Port of Newcastle site. **K6**



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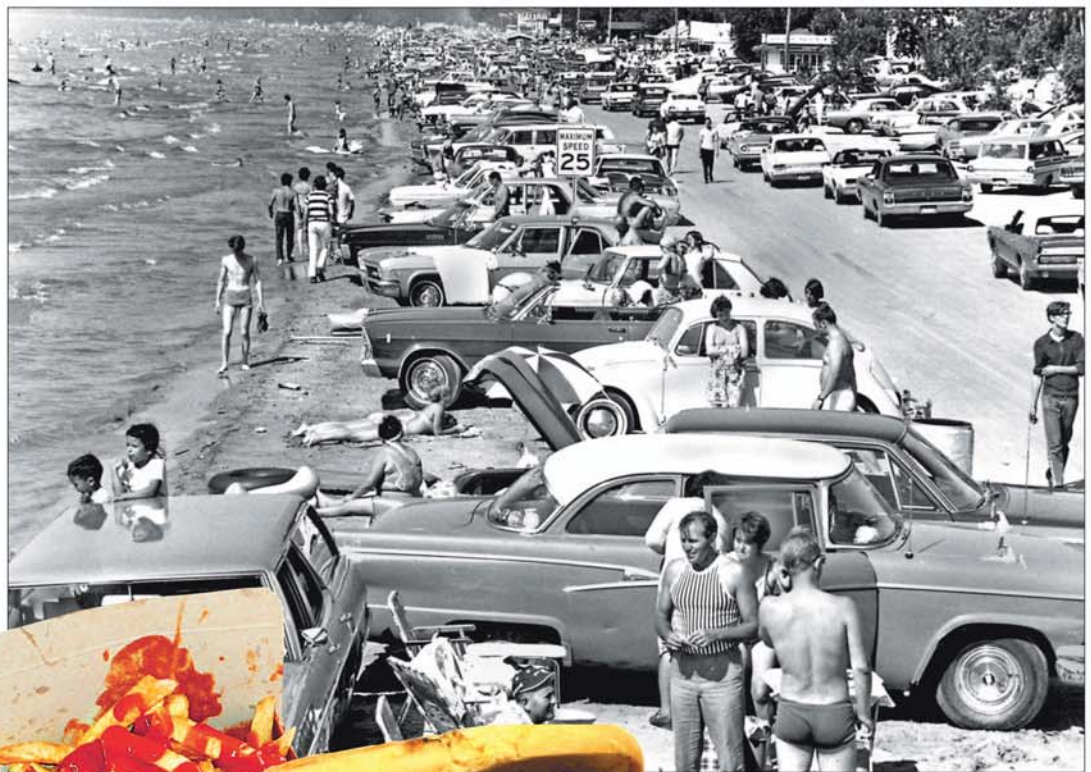
**HOUSE HELP**

This Sunday give Mom a gift to lighten her load. **K12**



# Reinventing Wasaga

Spectacular facelift will include resort hotel, spa and new downtown area with 375 homes **K21**



FRANK TESKEY FILE PHOTO/TORONTO STAR

Wasaga Beach — the longest freshwater beach in the world — has always been a gathering point for youth who celebrate summer. Here, on a hot weekend in 1969, the cars were so thick on the hot sand it was tough for a sunbather to find a spot.



## INSTANT DOWNTOWN

# Wasaga's heart transplant

Linear resort town clears way for a pedestrian friendly core — with help from big-box store

ROBERTA AVERY  
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

**WASAGA BEACH**—For decades thousands of the winter weary have headed to this resort community on Georgian Bay for the annual rite of spring known as the Victoria Day weekend or, as some call it, "the May 2-4."

Year in, year out, there haven't been many surprises. But those arriving next weekend are going to notice that big changes are underway.

The town — on what's billed as the world's longest freshwater beach — is getting a facelift, a heart and some help from a seemingly unlikely source.

The Waterslide opposite Beach Area 1 is down and so is most of the old Miramar Hotel. Other parts of the facelift include expansion of the Bananas Beach Club and renovations to the Friendly Greek restaurant. Tired-looking cottage courts across the community are being demolished to make way for more upscale development and a \$100-million resort hotel and spa is slated for the west end of the community.

"In 10 years time, Wasaga Beach will be hardly recognizable," says Bonnie Smith, Wasaga Beach's economic development officer.

As for the new heart, Wasaga Beach was incorporated as a town in 1974 by the province, but the linear nature of the municipality has resulted in both residential and commercial development occurring in nodes with no town centre, says Ray Kelso, Wasaga Beach's director of planning and development.

That's all about to change, says Mark Crowe, vice-president and general manager for the developer of Stonebridge by the Bay, Hamount Investments Ltd.'s Stonebridge plans call for a pedestrian-oriented community with 375 homes, a commercial section with stores, restaurants, a hotel, municipal parks, ponds, a trail system and green spaces.

"Wasaga Beach didn't have an all-encompassing centre, so we're creating a focal point," Crowe says.

Although Stonebridge by the Bay has been in the planning stages for six or seven years, it's a good fit for the province's Places to Grow policy, Kelso says.

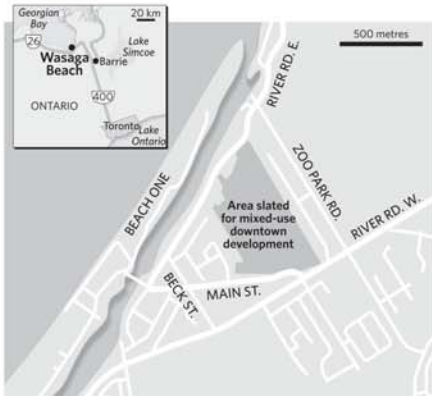
Last June, the province announced a plan (under its 2005 Places to Grow Act) for an area it designated the Greater Golden Horseshoe, which includes Simcoe County.

The plan calls for towns and cities to ensure that new development helps create complete communities that offer more choices in housing and a range of amenities such as shops, schools, entertainment and services that are closer to where people live.

In 1974, the population of this town was only around 4,000 people, but services including sewer and water, were brought in to accommodate peak sum-



Wasaga Beach planning manager Ray Kelso, left, goes over plans with developer Mark Crowe whose Stonebridge complex will mix housing and commercial properties.



mer weekends when as many as 150,000 people a day visit the beach, Kelso says.

With large capacity services in place, the town has been able to handle rapid growth and it now has a population that tops 16,000.

"We've also had a continuous municipal commitment to growth and it has really paid off," Kelso says.

But unlike a lot of the Wasaga Beach development that took place in the late 1990s and early 2000s — mostly subdivisions of single family bungalows with no commercial component — Stonebridge will include a mix of single family homes, high-density housing and a commercial centre.

"Stonebridge will consist of a

mix of diverse building types that cater to a range of lifestyle needs, including young families, professionals and retirees," Crowe says.

Roads are under construction and services have already been brought to the lot lines on two sides of the development.

Construction of the 75 homes in Phase I on the 34-hectare site at the east end of Wasaga Beach is scheduled to start this summer.

Homes in the first phase will be freehold single family homes — a mix of bungalows and two storeys. The first occupancy is scheduled for next spring. Townhomes and a 125-unit condominium are also slated for the site.

Prices for homes have not been



Georgian Bay town has long had a marvellous stretch of sand that attracts huge crowds in summer, but never a downtown.

finalized, but Crowe expects them to start around \$178,000 for the condominiums, with single family homes reaching the \$350,000 range.

"Stonebridge will draw and build upon the best of Wasaga Beach's historical architecture," Crowe says.

Mississauga-based Hamount is working to create the "unique and quaint character of a beach resort" by incorporating wrap-around porches, dormer and porthole style windows into home styles. The townhomes will have underground, two-car garages to improve curb appeal, Crowe says.

The vision for Stonebridge is a community similar to the pedestrian-friendly Intravest Village at Blue Mountain, with

boutique-style stores, restaurants and cafes with patios open to the street. There are to be small plazas and tree-lined streets dotted with seating areas.

There will also be walkways with gazebos leading down to Beach Area 1, which is just a few hundred metres from the site.

Developers planning to create a commercial and residential mix, need "very deep pockets," says Brian Johnston, president of the Ontario Home Builders' Association.

"It's a conundrum," says Johnston. "It's hard to find retailers to rent your commercial component until you have built the residential section and it's hard to sell homes when the commercial section isn't fully devel-

oped," says Johnston, who calls such projects "pretty rare."

It's much easier for developers to build highrise buildings close to existing and well-established commercial centres, than to start from scratch, he says.

Crowe agrees that it takes a lot of "heavy investment" to get a project such as Stonebridge off the ground, but says that Hamount, which has built commercial projects such as the indoor mall in Orangeville and a 250-home development in Oakville, is confident the company has the right mix.

And that's where the help from an unlikely source comes in. Urbanists who push for mixed uses usually see big-box retail as an enemy, but in Wasaga Beach, a 10,350-square-metre Wal-Mart (slated to open this summer) is being hailed as part of the plan.

Crowe says the mix of car-dependent retailing and a pedestrian-friendly centre full of boutiques means that the smaller merchants can draw on the Wal-Mart customer base and not just depend on the residents of the Stonebridge homes.

Smith adds that a recently opened Real Canadian Superstore, Canadian Tire and a large drugstore near the west end of the town and now Wal-Mart, indicate that retailers are firmly recognizing the community's potential.

Crowe says that Wal-Mart, or a similar anchor store, was a critical component to Stonebridge. "Wal-Mart is an engine to the development. It will create a destination that will bring people to Stonebridge," Crowe says.

## Tax idea seen as threat to first-time buyers

Realtors blast city talk of instituting land transfer levy

GAIL SWAINSON  
REAL ESTATE REPORTER

A proposed land transfer tax — pitched as an answer to Toronto's cash crunch — will push young buyers right out of the city's overheated housing market, industry leaders warn.

"The greatest impact will be on the first-time buyer, especially in Toronto's centre core market where costs are already so high," says Von Palmer, spokesperson for the Toronto Real Estate Board.

The homebuyer's tax is just one of a long list of potential new taxes proposed by city officials

to help balance Toronto's books.

The move worries real estate agents, who say homebuyers already face a tough enough struggle saving for down payments and closing costs.

Adding a tax representing 0.5 per cent of the cost of the average Toronto home — now valued at \$380,000 — would tack another \$1,900 on to the \$4,200 in land transfer tax already collected by the province.

"This will hurt a lot of Toronto homebuyers," says Palmer, the board's director of government relations. "It's a double whammy."

A fact sheet issued by the board shows that Toronto's proposed 0.5 per cent tax represents a 45 per cent hike in land transfer taxes.

The sheet also outlines a series

of home buying scenarios, showing the impact on home-owners.

For instance, a homebuyer with a 5 per cent down payment of \$19,000 on a home valued at \$378,000 would pay an additional \$11,319 in costs related to this one extra expenditure over the life of the mortgage.

Palmer said if the tax becomes law, Toronto — already the second costliest home buying market in the country — will be the first to have both municipal and provincial land transfer taxes.

Lisa Graham, a realtor specializing in Toronto's downtown core, says first-time buyers in that white hot housing market — where bidding wars are situation normal — already face significant challenges.

These include ever increasing

prices, competition from other first-time buyers and an ongoing shortage of available properties, says Graham, who is with Royal LePage's Johnston and Daniel Division.

A new tax could force first-timers to delay their purchase or

**Toronto would be first with municipal and provincial land transfer taxes**

even push them right out of the centre-core Toronto market altogether, she says.

"An additional tax would compound the issue of housing affordability in Toronto for first time buyers and growing families who need to move up," Graham adds.

Ray Cochrane of Re/Max Hallmark in Toronto's east end, agrees that any new home buying tax would hit first timers hardest. "It's not a whole lot but every penny counts when you're a first-time buyer," he says.

Cochrane works in the up-and-coming Birchcliffe Village, where homes start at a modest \$220,000, and in the Hunt Club area, where home prices can top \$1 million.

Add a new tax to existing closing costs of \$5,000 for a home valued at \$250,000, "and that's starting to look like a down payment," he says.

Traditionally, Canadian municipalities have been limited to collecting property taxes as their main source of income.

But last year, the province passed the City of Toronto Act, which gave city politicians sweeping powers to implement new taxes at their discretion.

A report issued by city staff in March outlined a number of possible revenue streams.

These included the 0.5 per cent added tax on land transfers, which would raise about \$102.7 million a year for the city and a 5 per cent tax on cigarettes, which would haul in an estimated \$25.3 million.

The city is also looking at bringing in road tolls and imposing new taxes on alcohol, parking, entertainment and billboards.

A series of public meetings are being conducted on the proposed taxes. A decision is expected by the end of the summer.