

Tartan Homes exec Pierre Dufresne first Ottawan in quarter century to lead Ontario home builders body



MEGAN GILLIS, POSTMEDIA

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Pierre Dufresne, vice-president of land development with Tartan Homes, is the new president of the Ontario Home Builders Association. *JULIE OLIVER / POSTMEDIA*

An Ottawan with nearly three decades of experience turning land into lots is the new president of the Ontario Home Builders Association, charged with advocating for an industry worth \$56 billion a year to the province's economy.

Pierre Dufresne, the vice-president for land development at Tartan Homes, began his term as OHBA president this week.

The first Ottawan to take on the role in a quarter of a century, the association says he's known for his "well-informed, thoughtful and measured" leadership style and brings "a perspective from beyond the GTA" to a group whose members have built 700,000 homes in the last decade.

We spoke with Dufresne, 53, who chuckles that every day is different.

Q. Why did you want the job?

A. I've always been heavily involved in the work that the Greater Ottawa Home Builders Association has done with city hall, sitting on committees, being part of policy development and always representing the industry to those issues. The reason I've always done that is it makes me better at the job that I do here at Tartan. If I'm part of policy formulation, I think I have a better understanding in implementing that policy to gain approvals and complete our developments.

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At the Ontario level, it's umbrella-type policy that is generated by the provincial government. I feel the same way about the benefit to our company but I'm also very passionate about our industry and ensuring policy is done correctly. There's a lot of public pressure on the politicians to protect the existing community and the existing environment. Change is inherent. Policy needs to be done properly to ensure that it's good and positive both for the existing and the future community.

Q. What are some of the housing issues you want to take to the provincial government?

A. The provincial government has taken an advocacy-based approach to policy that affects our industry. Right now, they're reforming the Ontario Municipal Board and they're going through public consultations as to what that should look like. That's critical to industry. Having an appeals body that serves to either confirm or to change local council decisions where warranted is something that is really necessary and needs to be strengthened and maintained. We're in dialogue with ministry officials and bureaucrats at Queens Park to ensure that whatever comes out will be beneficial and not damaging to our industry.

Q. Ottawa housing starts seem to be heating up just as they're cooling down Ontario-wide? Why?

A. Definitely, we're on an upswing here in Ottawa — we've noticed it here at Tartan over the summer in terms of volume of sales. I think there was a little bit of a lag in Ottawa because of the surplus inventory of condominium units that were unsold, and we're starting to see more condominium starts right now.

Q. You've been in the business 26 years this month, what's changed in what you're building and how you're building it?

A. Certainly, there's been a development of a very, very strong condominium market that did not exist when I first started or the first 10 years that I was working in this business. There's also the way that the city imposes their official plan policy and how they enable us to obtain our objectives of creating communities has changed — it's much more difficult to navigate that approvals policy. It's much more advocacy-based than it used to be. Although there's a deliberate intention of the city to determine where growth happens and what housing styles happen and where they happen, the process to get there is very interruptive. There was always a little bit of conflict — conflict is inherent in planning approvals — but I used to feel that that tended to be a good thing because that conflict concluded with the best possible developed product and the best possible communities to be built. That conflict now instead of being positive can be very cumbersome and at times negative.

Q. Can you point to a project that's taken longer?

A. Every one of my projects. I used to be able to sit with the builders and the principles of our company and come up with a schedule that most often was met in terms of when we can have a finished project, when I can deliver building lots to the building branch. I can't do that anymore. I can't just sit there and say here's when it's going to happen. I can say here's when it should happen, here's when I would like it to happen, but we're always over our timelines on every one of our projects. That's just part of the system now and I hear the same things from my colleagues in every other part of this province, it's not just unique to Ottawa.

Q. What new frontiers do you see for home building in Ottawa?

A. All the suburban communities have inventory or surplus land that has yet to be developed, but there are fixed boundaries that limit the growth in those communities — in Kanata, in Findlay Creek, in Riverside South, in Barrhaven,

in Stittsville and in Orléans. The question is, where does growth happen when it's needed to happen beyond those boundaries? I don't know if there will be a new growth area or just an expansion of the existing boundaries of the suburban communities and how much the growth environment — being the inner areas — can accommodate redevelopment growth. That will all be part of the puzzle. It's a very extensive exercise to get to that so it's kind of difficult to say where it's going to happen. I just know it needs to happen. One of the biggest problems in our province is the resistance to do boundary expansions for residential lands. There is a limited supply of lands to accommodate housing and that paradigm has actually driven up the prices of those lands, resulting in driving up the price of housing for the consumer.

Q. We've talked to you in the past about affordability. You certainly felt two years ago that there was an affordability issue. Do you still?

A. I continue to feel that way. If you look at the price of housing over the last 20 years and compare it with the increase of average salaries, it's exponentially higher. It's so much more difficult for the younger generation to get into the housing market. When I was a first-time house buyer age, a townhouse was \$120,000. Now that same house is going for \$350,000 and typical salaries have not increased in any type of a proportionate manner. I think that's part of the reason why the condo market took off so strongly in the past 15 years. The entry-level product, rather than the street-oriented townhouse has now become the 600 to 800 square foot condominium. It's necessary for people to enter that market and create that investment before being able to purchase a ground-oriented building with a backyard and everything else that they want.

This interview has been edited for length.

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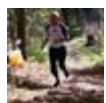
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**Gordon Hunter** · Lakefield College School

Mr Dufresne makes a good point. A number of years ago people in Ottawa loved an Official Plan that limited the ability of the suburban communities to accommodate our future growing population which they called urban sprawl. The two results have been the unnecessary high cost of land and housing and the push for intensified development projects in their neighbourhoods. Neither of which the people like. Well folks it was and is a package deal. You can't have one without the other two. Congratulations Pierre. You are truly one of the good guys in an important industry.

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**Tony DelCastelloz** · Wayne State University

Suburban growth should be limited. Urban sprawl is detrimental to cities. If anything the city should put stronger restrictions on development in the suburbs. Ottawa has enough developable land inside the greenbelt.

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