

# Builder has faith in rebuild plan

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**B**rantford builder Dalip Multani sure is a man with a deep faith in the city's long-running quest to clean up and redevelop its brownfield sites.

He is amply demonstrating that as his company, Multani Custom Homes, is just putting the final changes on the construction of a small enclave of nine semi-detached homes at 23 Mohawk St. — right across the road from the city's worst brownfield area, Greenwich-Mohawk.

The people who have already bought eight of those units also demonstrated their faith in the city when they plunked down about \$170,000 apiece to live there.

To comprehend that depth of faith, all you have to do is go and stand in front of the sparkling new Multani development that is just waiting for sod and other landscaping features. Then look directly across the road at a vast expanse of rubble and weeds just behind a mesh fence, and scores of ghastly looking factory buildings in the distance.

Even worse is the knowledge that the soil underneath is laced with plumes of chemical contaminants that ooze back and forth between the three properties that make up Greenwich-Mohawk, once known as the Sternson, Cockshutt and Massey-Ferguson complexes.

Today's scene of desolation was once the beating heart of the city's powerhouse farm machinery manufacturing empire that collapsed in the 1980s, leaving a gargantuan economic and environmental mess to be cleaned up by the city.

Trying to make a profit building and selling homes across the street from that was a challenging proposition, says Multani, an accomplished brownfield redeveloper.

Figure in, too, that 23 Mohawk is also one of the city's 15 brownfield sites targeted for action, along with the three Greenwich-Mohawk properties and some others in that area of Eagle Place. It is, in fact, the latest site on the list to have been successfully redeveloped.

"I knew from the start that anything I would build there would have to sell for under market prices just because of what is across the street and what is



Dalip Multani stands in front of homes he built on a former brownfield site on Mohawk Street.

THE EXPOSITOR / Brian Thompson

here," he said while standing in front of one unit and waving toward Greenwich-Mohawk.

"It can be done, but you have to be careful to keep your costs down. You can't cut costs in construction very much because that will only hurt the quality of your product, so you have to know how to find it in the remediation."

That means accurately identifying the level of contamination in the soil and removing it cost-effectively, while meeting Ministry of the Environment standards.

The 23 Mohawk property was originally the site of an auto-repair shop known as Don's Garage before the city bought it in the 1980s in anticipation of a stretch of the Brantford Southern Access Road that was never built.

The property was added to the brownfield list in 1999, and the city paid to demolish the buildings and undertake modest cleanup. It conducted an environmental assessment to determine the remediation cost, then put the property to public tender less than three years ago.

Multani met the city's reserve bid of

\$100,000. He kept the remediation costs to \$80,000, about \$20,000 lower than the original estimate, and then filed a record of site condition giving the property a clean bill of health.

Coun. Marguerite Ceschi-Smith led some ward meetings to get community input, then Multani settled on a business plan to construct three one-storey triplexes built to a scale and architectural style comparable with other homes in the area.

"People were concerned in the beginning with how it would look, but I believe all the neighbours are happy

with what they see," he said.

Multani has come to understand well how to redevelop brownfields, after carrying out successful projects on two other sites on the city's list. He transformed the Solaray property on Grand River Avenue into the Jamieson Court subdivision, and turned the Barber-Elis factory between Grey and Marlborough streets into a condominium complex.

"It bothers me to see properties left sitting idle, looking a mess, and I love to do infill lots and improve an area," he said. "To me, this one (on Mohawk) was a good spot."

Ceschi-Smith said the city is lucky to have in Multani a builder who is willing to take a risk on brownfields and turn out homes that benefit the community.

"We are the better for his work," she said.

Still, it was important that Multani believe in the city's commitment and ability to carry out the estimated \$100-million redevelopment of Greenwich-Mohawk, with varied types of housing, business, museum and park components if those who are buying Multani's latest homes would see any value. He even entertains the possibility of participating in that undertaking, too.

"I believe the city will achieve its goal, or I would not have built here," he said. "They have developed a good record on other brownfields and they are committed to completing this one. It will be an important improvement for the area."

Many of Multani's new homeowners feel the same way. They have been paying attention to media reports and keeping themselves informed about progress on the Greenwich-Mohawk project.

"I have faith that it will be done, eventually," Lee Irwin said as she stood in the garage of her unit at the eastern end of the development. "I hope they do a good job."

At the door of another unit, Patricia Accetola said that when she wanted to come back to Eagle Place after 21 years in Niagara Falls, she and her husband Anthony were persuaded to buy a unit at 23 Mohawk by her brother, who served for a while on the city's brownfields community advisory committee.

"I'm glad we came back," she said. "He told me that place across the street would be cleaned up and I believed him. So they better do it. I'm waiting."