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Remaking Regent Park

Brilliant city-rebuilding project or just another unnecessary attack on taxpayers?

By ROB GRANATSTEIN AND RON BANERJEE

One of Canada's most notorious neighbourhoods, Regent Park, is undergoing a \$1-billion regeneration. Over the next decade, the neighbourhood bordered by Gerrard, Parliament, Shuter and River Sts. will be transformed into a mix of townhouses, apartments, condos, and co-ops featuring varying income levels.

But is this a good idea and a prudent use of taxpayer dollars or a waste of time? Toronto Sun Editorial Page Editor Rob Granatstein says change is good, Cabbagetown resident and writer Ron Banerjee argues this is just the latest government money pit.

Granatstein: Blowing up Regent Park and starting over again not only will work, it has to work. In real estate, location, location, location sums it up. This is 70 acres of primo downtown Toronto territory. The new Regent Park will become a new must-buy neighbourhood, like its neighbour, Cabbagetown.

Banerjee: Desirable neighbourhoods are the product of market forces and private investment, not government intervention. Regent Park is billed as a "public-private partnership," but is just private money following socialist subsidies. Without subsidies, the private sector wouldn't touch Regent Park with a 10-foot pole. Average citizens who value quality of life won't either.

Granatstein: Fortunately, you're right. Market forces will drive people right into Regent Park. Finally the private enterprises are leading the way. Sobeys, Tim Hortons, RBC, have all signed on. Homebuyers can't wait to jump into the unworkable zone the city has torn down. This is all about quality of life.

Banerjee: Private investors are following the scent of government money. They'll stay as long as the taxpayer keeps feeding the white elephant. Sustainable development means business activity occurs due to a positive investment atmosphere, not from subsidies pumped in. Anyone can attract business through lavish subsidies. It achieves nothing in the long run.

Granatstein: What am I missing? Regent Park is a stone's throw from your neighbourhood. Would you rather the status quo? Should government cut this key geographic section of the city off completely, fence it off and let it die?

Banerjee: Promote values and virtues without focusing excessively on bricks and mortar. Improve the outlook and mentality of residents through programs like Pathways to Education, don't take a middle-class already struggling with debilitating taxes and fees, and waste billions to build Hilton-style facilities for Regent Park.

Granatstein: The city is building a \$11-million aquatic centre at Regent Park, funded by development fees on the Trump Tower. And Toronto Community Housing says it isn't subsidizing the new businesses since it needs the money. The real issue is the new Regent Park will work on its own. So what scares you?

BANERJEE: That's part of the problem. Downtown condos add thousands of residents, stressing the area's infrastructure. Development fees should fund infrastructure near the condos, not be diverted into a Regent Park Aquatics centre. Nobody is directly funding businesses, but the private investment is conditional on public funding. That's an indirect subsidy.

Granatstein: Ron, Regent Park is a hell-hole. Its design confused the cops and made it a haven for drug dealers. It screamed for redevelopment. With its location it's easy to make it mixed income. This isn't a government money pit, it's a neighbourhood life raft at a bargain price.

Banerjee: Regent Park is hellish because criminals there have destroyed a perfectly functional community. Drug dealers will always find ways to evade cops, regardless of the design. There is nothing in Regent Park's facilities that mops, brushes, and a positive community atmosphere can't fix. This expense is a pointless burden on the middle class.

Granatstein: Regent Park is a series of mazes, dead ends and is used as a blueprint for how not to build a neighbourhood. There's no foot traffic on the streets, no coffee shops, and it's all social housing and wind tunnels. Academics have made careers studying why Regent Park doesn't work. Mops won't fix it.

Banerjee: Academics, sociologists, and psycho-babblers ought to spend time outside their ivory towers. Within Regent Park are community gardens, basketball courts, a swimming pool ... and two large grocery stores plus six coffee shops within a 10-minute walk. If people don't succeed despite all this, we need to look elsewhere for root causes.

Granatstein: A 10-minute walk from this sprawling 69-acre neighbourhood means people aren't lingering on the streets with a coffee or hot dog. With no through streets, there isn't even vehicle activity. Perfect for crime. And do you want to spend millions repairing those terrible buildings?

Banerjee: In my sprawling neighbourhood, coffee shops are 10 minutes away. People have to walk a bit to linger but they don't deal drugs. Those brick buildings are not dilapidated, and the lack of through-traffic is similar to cul-de-sacs in every suburb. These are all excuses dreamed up by sociologists funded by government agencies.

Granatstein: Cabbagetown isn't exactly the same. There are parks that are meeting places. The streets are through streets, and Regent Park's dead end streets are nothing like cul-de-sacs. But I have a different idea. Why don't you go live in Regent Park if it's so great. I hear you can get a place cheap!

Banerjee: I agree Regent Park is undesirable, but due to the mentality of some residents, not poor architecture or design. And many neighbourhoods have dead-end streets, yet don't suffer Regent Park's ills. The cultural attributes of some communities at Regent Park is the real culprit, not urban design.

Granatstein: You'll be surprised, my friend. Better design, magnificent new, green buildings. Market rent and low income, just like the St. Lawrence neighbourhood, that's worked wonderfully. People on the streets shopping, not dealing drugs, you'll be proud of your neighbours.

Banerjee: Sounds utopian: We can join hands and sing Kumbaya. Rob, the radical left has always over-taxed the middle class and built new facilities for the undeserving. Nothing new here. Miller and Co.'s only formula: Tax and spend, or beg the feds for cash. It never has worked, and it never will.