

**Condo surge breathing life into downtown core**

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Vancouver-based Concert Properties is building Chelsea, a 66-unit luxury condominium project at Burdett Avenue and Vancouver and McClure streets. Developments such as the Chelsea bring life to the city's core. Condo sales were brisk last month with 106 sales in Victoria.

Spectators who love to eyeball condominium developments are seeing more than busy construction sites. They are watching communities in the making, says a university professor and regional planner.

When those condos go up in or near Victoria's downtown, they can help bring life to the city's core, says Gordon Price. "You are creating community or at least that's the object of the exercise," says Gordon Price, former Vancouver city councillor and publisher of the online magazine Price Tags. He teaches at the University of British Columbia's School of Community and Regional Planning and is director of the City Program at Simon Fraser University.

The latest figures from the Victoria Real Estate Board show this region's condominium sales remain strong as 227 units sold last month for an average price of \$301,783 and a median price of \$257,000. Of those, 106 units sold downtown.

Typically, most new condominiums are sold before the buildings are finished. New homes are just one element of a vital community, Price said from Vancouver yesterday. "You need a mix of what people need. There has to be sufficient retail ... Above all, a full-service medium-sized supermarket." Other services such as a postal office, dry cleaners and banking in a clean, safe and environmentally friendly place are also crucial. Price will be in Victoria next week to speak to an invitation-only event called "Smart decisions for smart growth" put on by Chard Development Ltd., the company developing the 14-storey Juliet condominium building underway at 760 Johnson St.

Community development is on this region's agenda with the Gaining Ground Summit, on the theme of "Whole-City Change," running from Sunday through Wednesday at the Laurel Point Inn.

For a sustainable area, "You need a critical mass of people so that enough services can be supported that are within walking distance," Price said. As density increases, other services, such as frequent transit, can kick in and reduce car use.

Price points to Vancouver, where the 1960s building boom created a huge stock of one-bedroom rental apartments downtown. "It has certainly provided the vitality now for which Vancouver is internationally recognized. And, comparatively, Victoria has gone through a lot of angst about how to maintain the vitality of its downtown."

Without a "significant-enough downtown population, it's very hard to maintain the vitality of a central area."

Downtown living can deliver advantages such as character, specialized services, cultural institutions, government and -- ideally -- education, Price said.

Greater Victoria's real estate market saw the average price of a single-family house at \$560,574 last month, with the median at \$485,000. The average price of a townhouse was \$412,149 and the median price was \$378,750.

Sales rose to 909 last month, up from 898 in April. Every spring brings more listings on the market. Last month the total grew to 3,462, which is 19 per cent higher than a year ago, and the highest point since June 2001, the real estate board said.

Board president Bev McIvor said buyers now have a lot more properties from which to choose, and the increase in sales points to ongoing high demand for properties that are priced realistically.

She added that 20 per cent of all single-family homes that sold in May in Greater Victoria went for less than \$400,000.

On the Web: [www.pricetags.ca](http://www.pricetags.ca) and [www.vreb.org](http://www.vreb.org)