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## OMB lets Queen Street West condo-plan proceed

**VAL ROSS**  
GLOBE AND MAIL UPDATE

The Ontario Municipal Board will clear the way for high-rise residential construction in the Queen West Triangle when its decision on three appeals that attempted to block the plans is posted on Monday.


For those who have defended the area (bordered by Queen and Sudbury Streets and the train tracks just west of the downtown core) known for its distinctive mix of low-rise Victorian architecture, affordable housing, art galleries and small businesses, the decision (released Friday afternoon to the OMB, city and neighbourhood lawyers) comes as bad news.

"This is a lynchpin decision," said urban activist David Pecaut, chair of the Toronto City Summit Alliance. "It could affect land adjacent to the train tracks from Queen West all the way to Bloor." Because it will displace small creative industries, the closely-watched decision could also tarnish Toronto's image as a creative, arts-friendly city.

Under OMB vice-chair Donald Granger, Monday's decision will open the way for a 19-story condo building (part of the two-building Bohemian Embassy complex); an 18-story building at 48 Abell St., which developers have said will offer affordable housing, pending their application for government grants; one 15-story condo; one 14-story condo; and three eight-story buildings. In all, around 1,500 new units will bring at least 2,000 new people into the area.

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In an e-mail sent Friday evening to neighbourhood preservation groups, including the Active 18 coalition, activist Margie Zeidler, wrote: "Queen Street West will now become a bunch of condo towers ... even if artists could afford to stay [in the neighbourhood] they will not — because it will be soon become a crummy mono-culture. ... Basically the developers got everything they wanted. I am truly shocked."

In effect, the OMB, a quasi-judicial agency, has final say over controversial Ontario developments. "In theory you can appeal," the Active 18 coalition's lawyer, Charles Campbell, told The Globe and Mail. "In practice the courts won't listen unless there has been a clear legal error."

Active 18 will hold a press conference on Tuesday. There are still avenues the group hopes to

explore, according to Zeidler. "I'd hope Mayor David Miller can step in, like David Crombie did when he imposed a height freeze on development until there was an official plan. I'd hope the provincial government could step in — after all, they've said they want the OMB to uphold Toronto's official plan."

It's not over yet, according to Don Wanagas, director of communications for Mayor David Miller. Reached at his home, he said, "We're concerned about the decision and we're having everyone, our planning and our legal people — look at it. There's still room for negotiations."

But Ken Greenberg, the noted international urban designer, observed, "Once the OMB has ruled, there's nothing for the developers to do but savour their victory."

When first elected, the Liberal government of Dalton McGuinty promised to reform the OMB, and it claimed that the 2005 City of Toronto Act was a strong first step. But the Queen West Triangle decision, the OMB has overridden what city planners said they wanted for this neighbourhood. "We've spent a lot of time on this at the OMB hearings. We're really worried about displacing the artists," Lynda Macdonald, area planner for the city, told *The Globe and Mail* on Thursday, the day before the OMB decision. At that time, Macdonald also spoke of the need to preserve the special characteristics of the old Queen West streetscape.

The decision also appears to contradict the urgings of a \$600,000 report unveiled in July by the mayor and Ontario tourism minister Jim Bradley. "Imagine a Toronto. . . Strategies for a Creative City" argued that cities need need affordable neighbourhoods as incubation spaces for culture and entrepreneurship. One oft-cited example, the warehouse at 48 Abell Street, which for years has housed software and fashion design businesses as well as artists' studios and living spaces, will now be razed to make way for the new condos.

University of Toronto Professor Meric Gertler, one of the authors of the Creative Cities report, and a witness at the OMB hearings, commented: "This Queen West Triangle case was of huge symbolic importance. It sends a pretty visible signal that despite the friendly rhetoric from different levels of government, their ability to deliver falls short. The chance for Toronto to be a real alternative seems to be squandered."

Said Margie Zeidler: "I would say that this decision could not make a more powerful argument for the abolition of the OMB. And if the province won't give us that — I say we secede from Ontario."

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