Paul Gagne

My wife and I have traveled to many large cities, in Canada and abroad, and we always plan our stays to be in the downtown/core, at the heart of activity and culture. We feel that the essence of a good city is the vibrancy of its downtown. This seems to align with the decision of Winnipeg's Executive Policy Committee to create the Shopping, Hospitality, and Entertainment District (SHED) in 2012. The SHED vision was “to create a distinct and dynamic urban place that ignites downtown revitalization efforts and energizes the entire City”. We purchased an apartment-style condo in the centre of Winnipeg believing in that vision and with the thought this city could turn around the stigma of its dangerous core by increasing its population density. This was an investment not only for ourselves but in the future of the city.

Unfortunately, the lack of rules around short term renters is preventing us from seeing that vision come true. The current nature of STRs is negatively impacting security and a sense of community in our building. Many renters seem to be locals booking spaces to party, leading to property damage and reduced quality of life for residents. The units used for STRs also have periods of long vacancy which lead to water wastage and water damage as well as raising concerns for fire safety and insurance. These issues can not be resolved through our condo board as the STR unit owners have organized and taken over the majority of board positions. As a result, our property values have dropped significantly due to people selling at a loss because of these disruptive STRs and a lack of recourse. In many cities, STRs are a boon for tourism, but when done wrong, as is the case in Winnipeg, they are a deterrent to the ambitions of a vibrant city. We believe that better by-laws can support the needs of the downtown community as well as encouraging tourism, and we hope to see Winnipeg follow the examples of other cities where STR guidelines, licensing and/or other by-laws have proven successful.

There are some good ideas being proposed to solve some of the problems related to STRs. For example, the requirement to inform immediate neighbours of contact information and schedules can certainly help with problem resolution. Also, the inclusion of both the Winnipeg Police Service and the UN Woman Safe Cities Global Initiative Steering Committee is a good start for ensuring the appropriate stakeholders are involved early in the process. However, we don't feel like these proposals go far enough to help the STR neighbours like us who are the early adopters in the vision of a truly great downtown core. We would like to see stricter requirements such as the requirement for the STRs be limited to primary residence OR that the owner/operator at least be a resident in the same building. This would ensure a greater degree of accountability and investment in the quality of life in the building and would prevent STR operators from trying to extract as much value out of our building to the detriment of the owner-residents. We would also like to see greater accountability for owners to be directly responsible in managing their units, rather than outsourcing to third-party managers who may or may not be appropriately licensed/insured.

Many attempts have been made to revitalize downtown in the past decade. Some, such as True North Square, have lived up to their promise, while others, such as the proposed opening of Portage and Main and plans to redevelop Portage Place Mall, have unfortunately fallen through. It's important that we maintain our momentum in revitalizing Downtown and prevent backsliding. Continuing to build off of successes by creating a happy, thriving community of downtown residents would allow the SHED to continue driving more successes, development and investment in the future. Allowing STRs to diminish the quality of life for downtown residents will impede this progress. We hope that strong, thoughtful legislation around STRs will support the effort to continue revitalizing our city and build a brighter future.