

Beyond the Bricks: OHBA chief Bob Finnigan

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Bob Finnigan has always had a thing for building.

Back in the summer of 1972, when he was 13, his dad needed someone to reshingle the roof of the family's wood-frame home in Scarborough.

Finnigan offered his services. "I had no problem holding a hammer or doing stuff around the house," the chief operating officer with [Heathwood Homes](#) and current president of the [Ontario Home Builders' Association](#) recalls in an interview. "And I didn't like stuff looking like crap."

So he called up a few buddies and the boys went to work as Finnigan's dad relaxed inside watching the Munich Summer Olympics on TV.

Wasn't his father concerned about the safety of the young lads up on his roof? "It was a bungalow," says Finnigan, "so we didn't have too far to fall."

And he got paid \$150 for his efforts, decent money in those days. "I bought a nice bike with it," he says.

It marked the start of a fruitful career in the building and development business for Finnigan, who a decade later would work as a real estate scout for grocery chains such as Dominion and Safeway, before ultimately becoming one of Hugh Heron's lieutenants at Heathwood Homes (www.heathwood.com).

Finnigan, 52, was named president of the OHBA last fall (www.ohba.ca). He's an obvious choice for the position, a known quantity in the industry who has earned the respect of his peers.

"He's multi-dimensional," says Stephen Dupuis, executive director of the GTA's Building Industry and Land Development Association (www.bildgta.ca). "Bob understands the political side and he understands the media side. He understands the big picture and he understands the details. He's well rounded that way."



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Bob Finnigan is the the chief operating officer with Heathwood Homes and the current president of the Ontario Home Builders' Association.

Finnigan is a long-standing member of the OHBA, which represents more than 4,000 member companies through 29 local associations across the province. He has sat on several of its committees and previously served as the association's first vice president.

He was also the first full-time president of BILD when that organization launched in 2007. Dupuis notes it was Finnigan who came up with the name for the association, formed by the merger of the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association and the Ontario Urban Development Institute.

"The only thing we hadn't resolved when we finished that merger was what we were going to call ourselves," Dupuis says. "We had this crazy acronym for six months."

After mulling over the matter for a while, Finnigan got an idea. He grabbed a piece of paper, wrote down his suggestion for a name — Building, Industry and Land Development — and a logo and showed it to Dupuis.

"It was a classic back of the napkin thing," Dupuis says. "And that was the name and away we went. Obviously it was a good choice, because it's been four years and I don't think anybody has to say 'Who?' or 'What?' They don't even have to say the long name any more, they know what BILD is."

Finnigan is leading the OHBA through a challenging time for the residential construction industry, which employs over 334,000 people and contributed \$34.4 billion to the province's economy in 2009, according to the OHBA.

The association is especially concerned about a dwindling supply of available land within the Greater Golden Horseshoe and the effect this will have on housing affordability.

With movements afoot to expand the region's greenbelt — the zone that protects about 730,000 hectares of prime farmland — the OHBA is worried about the adverse impact this will have on the "white belt," the area where development is supposed to be concentrated in accordance with Ontario's Places to Grow intensification policy.

Chipping away at the white belt will only serve to further restrict land supply for residential development, OHBA warns, impeding opportunities for future growth and raising home prices.

"The biggest thing OHBA advocates for is affordable housing," Finnigan explains. "If we can't get clarity on which lands are included in the white belt, the consequence is that people will have less choice and homes will be less affordable."

Increased taxation and excessive municipal development charges pose additional threats to housing affordability, he says.

"(Municipalities) just don't seem to think that when they charge us \$50,000 a house (in development charges), it's not an increased cost to the builder, it's a cost to the homeowner, because our profit margins don't change. And with the volume of single-family home construction dropping, those costs will become even greater."

Born and raised in Toronto, Finnigan grew up with Alan Heron, son of Hugh, the gregarious chief of Heathwood Homes. During summers off from high school and during college, the two worked for the company as labourers.

Finnigan attended Ryerson (then a polytechnical institute), where he majored in geography, specializing in retail

and industrial locations studies.

He went on to work as a real estate analyst for grocery companies Dominion, Safeway and Lumsden Brothers, evaluating the feasibility of store locations.

He returned to Heathwood in the late 1980s and set up a land development venture with Alan Heron, which they called Harrigan, an amalgam of their surnames. "I remember the first year moving from the food business to the homebuilding business, I doubled my income," Finnigan says. "I was 29 years old and thinking, 'I've made such a good move here.' "

Then the recession hit and the business all but evaporated.

Finnigan stayed on with Heathwood, however, and by the mid-1990s was made a partner in the company. He currently serves as Heathwood's chief operating officer of housing and is responsible for the firm's sales and marketing and product development.

"He's brought a human face to the marketing division," says Hugh Heron. "Bob has the ability to talk to people. He can talk to presidents of companies and workers as well. He has a good personality for getting along with people, and that's a big strength."

And Finnigan's expertise in franchising, honed in the grocery business, served the company well when Heathwood bought the Canadian rights to moving company Two Men and a Truck several years ago. "He knows what he's looking for in the franchise business," Heron says.

Finnigan recently called on his alma mater for help with a project that has garnered industry attention: Heathwood's "Green Home," a 4,429-square-foot eco-house located in the company's high-end Richmond Hill community [The Reserve](#).

For the next two years, a team led by Ryerson engineering students will measure the home's electricity, natural gas and water consumption, doing a cost-benefit analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of its energy- and water-conservation features.

These are "readily available consumer green features," Finnigan stresses — not experimental technologies — including energy-efficient lighting, tankless hot water system, roof-mounted photovoltaic solar panels and a grey water recovery system, which reuses bath/shower water for flushing toilets, reducing household water use by one-third.

The green home also functions as a classroom, with signs explaining the home's various green features and a touchscreen that shows how the home's security, lighting, gas and hot water heating systems is monitored via the web.

The idea is to educate both builders and consumers on the cost and energy savings that a truly green home can offer. (An identical home constructed to an Energy Star standard has been built in Heathwood's nearby [Forestbrook](#) community and also will be monitored to see how it compares to the green home.)

The project has a lot to do with Heathwood wanting to be good, eco-friendly corporate citizens, says Finnigan, who is spearheading the initiative. Of course, it's also about ensuring the company remains an industry leader as

the building business undergoes a green revolution. "We're basically pioneering for our future homes."

And the OHBA gets some mileage out of it as well, he notes. "I'm Bob their green builder."

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