

COMMENT

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After 25 years, a transformative project goes to the public

KENNETH MARIASH

A commentary by the developer of the Roundhouse project.

After many changes and set-backs, the Roundhouse proposal for Vic West is going to a public hearing today, our 25th anniversary on the project.

With carrying costs of more than \$1 million a month, the quarter-century delay is not good for the economics or for the housing supply.

The history of the project, the size of downtown from Pandora Avenue to the Empress, is one of slow progress and efforts to fix zoning mistakes.

In the 1960s, '70s, and '80s, the Songhees area struggled through the transition from industrial, with a working harbour, to residential. Many visions were considered before the concept of flat, wide buildings was chosen.

The first buildings had major problems with construction quality, completion, and sales. Serious financial problems caused foreclosures.

In the 1980s, the province, which owned the land, could not sell the secondary sites behind the wall of wide waterfront buildings. Worse yet, there was no master plan for the area.

These secondary sites were presented to the local and national development industry, including the Mariash Group, but no one was prepared to go into a sure-to-lose situation.

In the late 1990s, the Mariash Group agreed to buy all the land and do a master plan with enough quality and scale to change the design, vision, and zoning. This would create a different, positive perception of the area with views and open space.

The plan called for more vertical buildings at Bayview Hilltop, along with parks and open space such as Vic West Dog Park, turning the Songhees Peninsula and Vic West into a success.

Unfortunately, the zoning when we bought the site was unusable because it called for buildings that were too large to fit.

Rezoning the land, with the vertical concept, was contro-



An artist's rendering of the proposed Roundhouse project in Victoria West. This image is an update of one that appeared in the Times Colonist's Wednesday edition. BAYVIEWPLACE.COM

versial and difficult. It was not completed until 2009, after a long and costly delay, and the final buildings were not finished until 2018.

The zoning of the adjacent Roundhouse property also had problems, but in 2008 we bought the land in the hopes that those problems could be resolved.

They were not, so our group and the city decided in 2017 to go forward with a complete rezoning.

We wanted to leave the zoning on the south side of the site and rezone the empty vacant land on the north side, which is about two-thirds of the total area. The city wanted us to rezone the entire property.

We are adding three buildings and one small eight- or 10-storey building on Esquimalt Road that will enhance the Roundhouse, which is seven metres below grade, to help animate the Esquimalt Road frontage to draw people in from the north and around the city.

We applied for a floor area



The proposed Roundhouse Plaza in Victoria West. BAYVIEWPLACE.COM

ratio, the amount of floor space in relation to the parcel size, of 5.8. The ratio helps cover amenities like daycare space, playgrounds and other things.

This ratio was acceptable to many, including most of the councillors of the day and the community, subject to us donating affordable housing

in each building.

Instead, we offered one complete site. Over the past year or two, the floor area ratio has been reduced and increased, but is still less than the original application. But even if we are losing homes, any housing is better than no housing.

Our history with this project

is indicative of the struggles all cities are having with urgent housing demand. Five to 25 years to get approvals is too costly and too slow. The cost of approvals on our project is about \$250,000 a unit.

English-speaking countries are having the largest housing crises. That is because the 1907 British Town Planning Act, adapted by other countries, prioritized detached houses — density was seen as crowding. Municipal acts and laws were used to flatten cities and push out certain demographic groups.

This allowed interest groups, communities, councils, and others to control the kind, amount, and speed of approvals, including moving different types of housing away to the less fortunate and less attractive areas, slowing the land and housing supply and increasing the cost.

NIMBY groups have leveraged these municipal acts, fearing growth, protecting their area from others, and restricting the supply of housing with zoned land scarcity. They have slowed approvals and increased the costs and prices to create a crisis.

Let's seize the moment and free us from these restrictive rules that are used with selfish intention.

Supply responsible housing in strategic places near downtowns, transportation modes, and employment centres to create walking communities, reduce cars, and increase sustainability and affordability.

Support housing, support good and better communities. The Bayview Place Roundhouse second phase will be as good or better than the successful Bayview Phase One.

Thank you to the community that has supported and worked with us to save Vic West, and thank you to the Bayview team for struggling with the challenges of a site with heritage, a railway right-of-way, remediation needs, and high expectations to create an economic solution that, at best, might break even.

No more talk about profit, please.

This project will be transformative.

Those bike lanes work when we need to relax

Let me get this straight. While innocent people are dying across the planet, we are so stressed about off-leash dogs and pickleball courts?

I think I need a bike lane to unwind!

Brock Carbery
Victoria

Belfry Theatre made the correct call

I think it was right that the Belfry decided not to stage *The Runner*.

Other theatres may want to do so but I would not seek entertainment or even distraction in a story that presented an Israeli protagonist as a hero who rescues, at his own peril, a Palestinian.

Not at this time.

Sandra Slobodian
Esquimalt

Don't ban cellphones, just lock them up

Cellphones do not have to be banned from our school system. Why?

Many schools have already put in a system to avoid the use of cellphones during school class times. The Alberni District Secondary School in Port Alberni has a system that works.

All students when entering a classroom must put their cellphones into a lock box at the entrance to the classroom. When the bell rings to end that period, students pick up their phones and head on to their next class.

Upon entering the next classroom, the phones are put into a lock box again.

This procedure is followed throughout the school day.

In summary, all classroom instruction is conducted without any existence of a cellphone during the class. Plain and simple common sense always prevail.

Joe Sawchuk
Duncan

Stuck in the hallway for three days

Back in the day when the Medical Services Plan in British Columbia charged a monthly health care fee, you had the

option of paying a little extra to get a two-bed semi-private room in the hospital, instead of a four-bed ward.

Well, those days are long gone. As I write this, my wife is into her third day parked in the hallway on the sixth floor of Victoria General Hospital. There were four other patients stuck there too, when I was there yesterday.

No privacy, and she can't even escape to the lounge — it is used for the various devices that were formerly left in the hall.

I greeted her yesterday by saying "Welcome to the Third World." She was crying.

Larry Lloyd
Sooke

A right to protest at the legislature

I understand and share in the horror Jews in Israel and elsewhere felt on Oct. 7, and the mounting concern and fear they surely have felt since the tragedy of that day.

But I strongly object to the description of the weekly protests as pro-Hamas, hate-filled demonstrations. These events are attended by Victoria residents, of all ages and backgrounds, who might not agree on all aspects of the issue but unite to call for an end to Israel's brutal and indiscriminate military operations in Gaza.

They also call for a resolution to the plight of the millions living in Gaza and the West Bank — arguably the only path to lasting peace and security for Israel itself.

There is room for disagreement about current and historical events.

There is room for my view that the government of Israel's current destruction of Gaza and slaughter of thousands of civilians is indefensible and must be condemned by my elected representatives.

My opinion does not make me an anti-semitic, and I have the right to express it by peaceful protest on the grounds of the legislature.

Myriam Brulot
Oak Bay

CRD's land assembly flawed in several ways

I am against the Capital Regional District land assembly bylaw for many reasons.

First of all, there are no details. No properties have been identified nor have

partners committed to build and manage the housing.

Secondly, since there are no details, the borrowing limit is arbitrary. Why not \$40 million, \$200 million or any other amount?

Thirdly, is the unelected CRD the best entity to manage this process? Housing is on the agenda of both the federal and provincial governments.

They are in a much better position to fund these initiatives.

Do we really need to add another layer of bureaucracy with very limited taxation powers?

Finally, debt is the easiest way to push the costs down the road. I am never comfortable giving politicians a blank cheque to do as they see fit.

As taxpayers we are left to deal with the consequences long after those in charge have left.

I must also point out the undemocratic Alternate Approval Process system. It was not easy to find the Electoral Response Form on the CRD website.

I either have to download and print a form or go to the CRD office in downtown Victoria to get one. Then I have to fill it out and mail or drop it off at the same location.

Imagine if our local elections worked that way. We'd be lucky to get 100 people to vote. In commercial lingo this whole process is similar to negative option billing and is actually outlawed.

Nevertheless, I will do my best to overcome these hurdles to register my objection. I encourage others to do the same. You do not have to be a homeowner to do so.

Any person eligible to vote in municipal elections within the CRD can participate.

Matt McGeachie
Victoria

Regional district should be stopped

Do we want the Capital Regional District to borrow another \$85 million to get into the housing business? The CRD is proposing this.

The CRD has announced that unless 32,000 electors complain and say no, they will borrow another \$85 million. That's more than 10 per cent of the annual budget and another \$5 million a year in taxes, for the next 30 years.

The CRD is a governing body that should not be in the housing business.

Housing should be the purview of the federal government. They can print as much money as they like to support housing. The CRD can't print money,

it can only spend ours.

We shouldn't let them do this. To vote on this issue go to the CRD website.

Rick Fonger
Sooke

About the barracks in Paris and Barcelona

Letter writer Gene Miller cites Paris and Barcelona to answer critics of higher density in Victoria. Looking at the last few years of development here, the chances of seeing anything like Cerdà's Eixample or Haussmann's Paris in Victoria would seem to be slim to none.

Successive councils have overridden community plans and the advice of the city's own planners to grant variance after variance in acquiescence to the will of developers. The result is mish-mash of banal towers on streets devoid of life or character in the absence of any greater vision for what our city could be.

We can only dream of planned neighbourhoods of six- and seven-storey apartment buildings where people's need for leisure, health and social relationships take priority. If our recent history is anything to go by, I'd say the odds favour Soviet-style residential barracks.

Frederick Shand
Victoria

Keep it simple, please, on the rock in the park

Regarding the missing plaque, I would be happy if just "Beacon Hill Park" was on the rock.

At least I would know where I am. Those who do not like certain language, history or whatever can make up their own feelings about it.

Rob J. Hinton
Maple Bay

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