

# Editorial: Densification must include livability

## Oakridge development needs to keep new residents in mind

VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 20, 2014

Vancouver council is embracing densification as a way of promoting the city's sustainability. But, in endorsing massive projects such as the soon-to-be developed Oakridge Centre, municipal politicians also need to keep livability in mind.

Plans for a \$1.5-billion redevelopment around the Oakridge Mall at 41st and Cambie reflect something of an experiment in urban planning.

The 12-hectare neighbourhood, comprising mostly single-family dwellings, kilometres from Vancouver's downtown core, is to become during the next few years a civic hub with thousands of new residents, about 2,900 new condo units, 11 residential towers with some soaring to 44 storeys (the tallest in the area now are seven storeys). Retail space will more than double; office space will nearly quadruple. More than 3,000 jobs are to be created in this redesigned neighbourhood. The development also will accommodate park space, a community centre, library, child care facility and seniors centre.

The plan, conceived in 2007, is in keeping with Metro Vancouver's regional growth strategy, encouraging new density along key transportation corridors.

Density has become all the rage in this fast-growing city, a means to respond to population growth and climate change. The hope is it will curtail suburban sprawl and keep housing more affordable in neighbourhoods designed to be walkable and good for cycling, with plenty of public transit and shops and businesses.

"If we're going to save the planet," project architect Gregory Henriquez has been quoted as stating, "other parts of the city need to densify besides downtown."

But the downsides of density, which have been less well advertised, are just as real.

In high-density neighbourhoods, residential crowding can make daily life less comfortable: Condo conflicts are frequent; feelings of anonymity can accompany life in big, tall complexes and pressures on community infrastructure grow.

Opponents of the Oakridge plan, understandably, have cited such complications at recent public hearings.

One big concern is how the five-year-old Canada Line will deal with a surge in passengers as density grows along the Cambie corridor. Already, during rush hour, transit users are crushed like sardines in the two-car trains.

It is hard to understand why city planners approved such small station platforms and two-train transit configurations for the line but service levels, the city assures, can be increased through a service-contract purchase of more frequent trains.

Developers too must become more sensitive to densification's downsides when designing their towers,

Every person's home becomes something of a sanctuary in a big, bustling city such as Vancouver.

Accordingly, developers should create as much green space as possible around residential

accommodation. They would do well to ensure windows from the units in any given building do not look

directly into the windows of an adjacent complex. Private balconies — ones that are not shared spaces

with a simple divider between them — become important, as does soundproofing, and measures that

can enhance the professionalism of and ground rules for condominium strata councils.

In the end, livability is every bit as important a development principle as sustainability because it is

essential that Vancouver residents buy into densification for it to be viable.

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