

Mixed-use projects near transit benefit everyone, developers say

The transition to higher density, while difficult for some, can also reinvigorate a neighbourhood

BY EVAN DUGGAN, VANCOUVER SUN MARCH 25, 2014



Crossroads, at the corner of Cambie and Broadway in Vancouver, is a 'true mixed-used development' that helped to re-invigorate the neighbourhood, says PCI president Andrew Grant.

Photograph by: RICHARD LAM, PNG

VANCOUVER — For observers and stakeholders of Metro Vancouver's real estate market, it's clear the desire of developers and city councils around the region to continue to erect so-called mini-cities along transit hubs is a trend that will continue.

Vancouver city council's 6-3 approval this month of the controversial \$1.5-billion Oakridge mixed residential and commercial development by Ivanhoe Cambridge and Westbank Projects Corp. is another step down a path that already includes Marine Gateway, King George Station and others. It provokes a question: Do similar existing large mixed-use developments provide a benefit to the neighbourhoods in which they're located?

Between 2005 and 2009, PCI Group's Crossroads development took shape where Cambie Street meets Broadway in Vancouver. Crossroads has roughly 85,000 sq. ft. of office space, 85,000 sq. ft. of market condominiums and townhomes, and 140,000 sq. ft. of retail space that includes a London Drugs, an RBC and a Milestones restaurant. It also houses an always-busy Whole Foods Market.

Crossroads, coupled with the opening of the Canada Line in 2009, established a "true mixed-used development" that helped to re-invigorate the neighbourhood, claims PCI president Andrew Grant.

When they bought the site, "it had a very rundown, old commercial complex on it that was full of businesses that didn't really do that well," he said in an interview.

The space didn't properly serve the neighbourhood and didn't have much in terms of office space. It didn't have any residential units, he said.

"We were able to take that large building, demolish it and in its place put 88 condo units, a significant office building ... that the City of Vancouver leased for their engineering department."

The retail component has been one of Crossroads' major successes, Grant said. The retail "fronts to three streets" and the Whole Foods store generates a lot of foot traffic. Whole Foods also drew activity for other business in the area, he says. "It's a tremendously successful store."

The other key component at Crossroads has been proximity to mass transit. The Canada Line station at the same intersection opened while Crossroads was being built, Grant said, and has helped to turn the location into a multi-service transit and residential node.

Grant said that while PCI doesn't track data on whether or not residents of the condos work at their developments, large employers, including the City of Vancouver, routinely say they're interested in setting up shop in mixed-use buildings such as Crossroads and Marine Gateway because they offer the option of living spaces, shopping, access to food and links to the TransLink network.

New homebuyers seem to be keener these days to live in bustling hubs rather than quiet, dark neighbourhoods, said Doug LePatourel, vice-president of Colliers Vancouver Retail Division.

In the past, people might have been turned off by the potential street noise and activity, "but I think there is a real switch there," LePatourel said. "People are now looking at it as kind of a trendy thing."

He said developments like Crossroads, which have busy restaurants, grocery stores and other services, also tend to offer more security and safety. "These shops are usually open earlier and much later in the evening."

Grant said projects like Crossroads show that much larger mixed-use developments coming down the pipe are part of Vancouver's future — even if a number of residents and neighbours decry them.

Public hearings ahead of council's approval of Oakridge proved that not everyone is on board with city hall's plan to increase density along the Canada Line.

Vancouver city councillor Adriane Carr said last week that the approved Oakridge plan is too dense and residents of the neighbourhood don't welcome it. "It's irresponsible to approve so much density without a guarantee of infrastructure that goes along with it," she said.

Grant admits that these new types of mixed-use development are truly massive and change the complexion of neighbourhoods. "But we really need to place density on transit to [get] people out of their cars," he says. "We find that our buyers, these days, a lot of them are purchasing without owning an automobile. They are very attracted to the convenience of transit so they can come and go around the city."

Many of the large prospective commercial tenants want transit to be part of the package, too, he says. "There are folks who regret that big density comes to these sites, but we have to take advantage of the opportunity in order to plan the city's future."

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