

BATTLE BREWING OVER INDUSTRIAL PROPERTY

Concord Pacific's 'mixed-use' development plan faces opposition

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Concord Pacific could face a long battle over its plans to turn the Molson brewery in Vancouver into a "sustainable mixed-use" development.



MARK VAN MANEN/PNG The Molson brewery building at 1550 Burrard St. has been sold to residential development giant Concord Pacific for \$185 million, four times the appraised value.

The residential development giant has paid \$185 million for the Kitsilano brewery and its land, more than four times the appraised value of the industrial-zoned property.

Concord won't say precisely what form of mixed use it is contemplating for the land at 1550 Burrard St., but its long-term vision is to "attract knowledgebased local and global tech companies," said Peter Webb, a senior vice-president of development with the company.

He added that the company "plans to work with the approving authorities and the public to create a new addition to the community."

But there may be no appetite in the short term for such a move, which would require the blessing of policy-makers and residents in Vancouver and across the region.

Raymond Louie, a Vancouver city councillor, said Concord's designs for a mixed-use development might be premature.

"This is a long road, I expect, before anything would change on this particular piece of property," Louie said in an interview. "We've previously made it very clear to all inquiries that this site is zoned industrial. The plans of Concord are, of course, their plans."

Because the three-hectare brewery site is listed in Vancouver's regional context statement as a job-generating industrial location, any change would require the support of two-thirds of Metro Vancouver's board of governors with residents across Metro getting a chance to comment.

Greg Moore, the mayor of Port Coquitlam and chair of the Metro board, said the stringent process is designed to protect industrial land, the supply of which has been dropping.

"We at Metro placed industrial land at a pretty high threshold because we realized the importance of it," Moore said in an interview. "Really, the only way we see more industrial land produced is when agricultural land is taken away. We acknowledge the importance of food security and our agricultural land, so we don't want to erode either of those two land bases."

If Vancouver supported Concord in a bid to rezone the land, it would be up to the city itself to apply to Metro for a change, Moore said.

Concord may be known for its residential developments, but the company is also involved in information technology, telecommunications and green power, lending credence to its plan to put tech firms into the brewery site.

Louie speculated the company may be looking at interim uses until such time "that they can convince the council of the day that a change is appropriate. But for now, the standing position of council is that it's industrial land."

Accommodation for industrial jobs is an important part of a healthy city, said the Vision Vancouver councillor, but he added that the city also needed to make space for green tech jobs "as we transition away from the heavy industrial of the olden days to what we hope to be a knowledge-based economy."

Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson said his priority was to protect "valuable and high-demand job spaces" while the economy continues to grow.

"The Molson site is zoned for industrial uses, not residential development," Robertson said. "I expect any proposal that comes forward for the Molson site will focus on increasing tech, green and highskilled job space."

That view of industry is not necessarily shared by all councillors. George Affleck, a councillor and member of the Non-Partisan Association, said he was apprehensive about classifying tech jobs as industrial. "I don't see that as industrial. I see that as office work ... that is not what was intended for the space," Affleck said, adding that he did not expect the brewery site to be used for something like major manufacturing, but perhaps something more like food distribution or the movement of goods. "It's important for us to keep our industrial land protected."

Michael Geller, a Vancouver-based architect and planner, said a mixed use residential and industrial development "could make a lot of sense." Geller said such blended uses are common in Europe and Asia and noted that Vancouver already has at least one such space — Strathcona Village in the 900 block of East Hastings Street.

"What we consider industrial use today is very different than what we considered industrial use in my grandfather's day," Geller said. "If the city allows industrial uses to be replaced by residential, that would be a mistake. But if it allows someone to add residential in addition to the amount of industrial developments that the zoning would allow, that could be a win-win."

Geller said the brewery site “could be a wonderful place for people to live if Concord should choose that. And based on the price they paid, they’re not thinking just light industrial and office. They’re thinking housing in my opinion, and I don’t think we should be worried.”

Some of Molson’s \$185-million take will go into a new B.C. brewery, said Jennifer Kerr, a spokeswoman for Molson Coors Canada. The company has not found a site, but it plans to have a new brewery by the end of 2018. Until that time, Molson will lease the property from Concord to remain on the site, Kerr said.