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Give West Van more options for 1300-block Ambleside

BY DAVID SHEFFIELD, NORTH SHORE NEWS FEBRUARY 27, 2013

Dear Editor:

I attended the public meeting at the Kay Meek Centre on Jan. 23 to garner public feedback for Grosvenor's proposed 1300-block Marine Drive development. I came away convinced that, despite apparently earnest efforts on the part of the developer and West Vancouver staff to get it right on this special site, that they have instead got it very wrong.

The public feedback portion of the evening began with a long string of unconditionally supportive speakers. Some were almost rapturous with the prospect of being able to buy a cup of coffee at a new venue, shop in a new store, and walk through a 40-foot-wide mid-block opening to connect with the sea in an otherwise block-long wall of commercial and residential units. Benefits including nighttime entertainment and fine dining opportunities were attributed to the project, even though the developer and architect only specified that the site would offer undefined commercial opportunities. Proponents also seemed unaware that some of the proposed public amenities were only to be expected for a major development of this type - they were not extraordinary.

Apparently the "visioning sessions" conducted in the early stages of public consultation clearly indicated a strong opposition to any highrise towers on the block. The proposed 108-foot-high buildings (equivalent to a normal 11-storey building) actually meet the definition of highrises, and the architect referred to similar height buildings north of Marine Drive as such. So instead of avoiding highrises that would block views both looking out to sea and back at Sentinel Hill, the proposed development is effectively a solid, block-long highrise building with only a small central gap. If the development hinges on achieving a certain density, West Vancouver and Grosvenor should be presenting other options to achieve that density. The most obvious would be a slender iconic point tower at the east end of the site and lower, view-saving building towards 14th Street that could be developed as a true festival street and arts focus area with public space. Even some of the proponents of the development suggested that point towers would be a better option, but apparently this was outside Grosvenor's terms of reference.

Allowing a solid wall of highrise apartments to be constructed along much of the West Vancouver waterfront was one of the biggest planning errors in the history of the district, and should not be compounded by doing the same in this block. There is a consensus that the 1300-block Marine should be redeveloped, and that Ambleside should connect with the sea. We seem to have a capable developer and a great opportunity to get it right. Let's bring forward more options, please.

David Sheffield, West Vancouver

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