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AmblesideWhen?

Business owners and residents have different visions for the future

BY TESSA HOLLOWAY, NORTH SHORE NEWS AUGUST 21, 2011



West Vancouver Chamber of Commerce president Gabrielle Loren stands outside a business in the 1300-block of Marine Drive. Reflected in the window is some of the area that she hopes will be revitalized in the future.

Photograph by: Paul McGrath, NEWS

IT'S DECISION TIME FOR AMBLESIDE, BUT THE STREETS DON'T SHOW IT YET.

Sipping his coffee on the sidewalk tables outside Café Crema on a Monday afternoon, Craig Cameron does a quick count of the people walking past the restaurant, motioning to a group of three passersby.

"It's really sleepy. It's got beautiful natural assets, but I think the built environment is pretty uninspiring and pretty dead," he said. "People walk along the Seawalk, but they don't come across the tracks. Almost all the businesses around here are failing."

A week ago, it was a different story. Harmony Arts was in full swing and crowds were sitting on the waterfront sipping wine and listening to the musicians play. It's something Cameron, a resident of 16th Street, wants to see more of year round, but as the clock strikes 6 p.m. he's jolted from his daydream.

With coffee still in our mugs, we saunter back inside as the server reminds us it's closing time. Ambleside is rolling up its sidewalks as if to serve as an exclamation mark to Cameron's comments. Outside, the streets are quiet, stores are being locked and only a few restaurants stay open.

A few blocks away at the Village at Park Royal, the contrast is obvious. Shoppers dart in and out of stores on West Vancouver's "Main Street," while most of the tables on the plaza outside Whole Foods are full. The chatter and clinking of glasses at Cactus Club drowns out the trickle of the water feature. The barista at Delany's Coffee House kindly confirms that the café is open until 8 p.m. today, while some stores at the mall keep the lights on until 10 p.m. daily.

Cameron prefers Ambleside to Park Royal - it's a community street, he says, rather than destination chain stores - and wants to see his three kids stay here. But he says he's looking for a little more vibrancy, street life, for shops to stay open later and for concerts, community events, arts exhibits and places where people can work. In short, he wants Ambleside revitalization.

That's what West Vancouver's mayor and council are promising with AmblesideNow, and what arts groups are promising with the arts district plan. But in this case, the devil is in the details: How high and how big is where consensus falls apart.

The planning began with the Ambleside Town Centre strategy, completed three years ago, but since then there's been little progress to revitalize the district's commercial core.

That could change quickly, as the district is pushing ahead with a new AmblesideNow initiative, and proposals are coming in for a handful of special sites slated for extra density. Among them is the Safeway site at 17th Street and Marine Drive, where a proposed 10-to 15-storey building was shot down when 400 irate residents crowded the public hearing, and the 1300-block of Marine Drive, where developers Grosvenor are planning a new mixed-use project.

Aside from the village itself, the Arts in Ambleside Commission has drawn up plans for an arts precinct on Argyle Avenue, including targeting the current Ferry Building gallery location for a brand new art gallery space, administrative building and education centre. That will also come before council this fall, and has also attracted a flurry of letters, largely in opposition to the size of the building.

Scenery Slater, a resident of Evelyn Drive who lives in one of the first highrises built in West Vancouver, admits that Ambleside can use some change, but she's worried Ambleside revitalization is being used as a wedge to upzone the village and throw out the official community plan. She was one of the residents who spoke against the Safeway project at the open house in the spring, and is keeping a wary eye on the 1300-block site.

"The 1300-block will have higher density still, and I don't think that's what the neighbourhood wants, and it's certainly not providing us with options," she said.

She said she was worried about the loss of the neighbourhood character, the village feel, if towers were put in. She said the densification allowed for in the official community plan is enough.

The OCP and the Ambleside Town Centre strategy limit most of the building heights to three stories on Marine Drive and four stories for those that meet certain criteria, which Slater is comfortable with, but towers, mid-rise or highrise, are a no go.

"It will affect tons of other people who live just behind there, and I find that heartbreaking," she said.

Oscar Lyseko is also on Duchess Avenue, and he thinks plans are moving too fast.

"There's too much happening along this whole corridor and it's frightening if even half of it gets built. It will just take away from the Ambleside flavour, period," he said.

He said he didn't understand why the district went through the process of drawing up an official community plan, only to move forward with buildings that are far denser than what's allowed.

"Why bother with the OCP then? They could have saved all that time and money and not come up with an overall plan

just to change it down the road in 10 years."

The village atmosphere is also something Rob Harrington speaks highly of, but when he saw the proposals for the Safeway site he liked what he saw.

As the owner of West Van Florist Home and Garden, a mainstay of Ambleside since 1933, and a resident of the area, he said **more shoppers and more people are needed to keep businesses open.**

"I thought the plan, the options were good, but council turns it down," he said. "Council is just not willing to go along with the silent majority, they listen to a few people from these special interest groups. Do they want to see a bunch of boarded-up stores? How long can the merchants hang on?"

Harrington said he'd like to develop his own shop with **apartments on the second floor and up, which would allow them to share the tax burden with residences and lower their overall costs.** West Vancouver approved buildings up to three storeys on Ambleside as part of the town centre strategy, up from two, but **he said four storeys are needed to make it viable.**

"All sorts of new development is happening along the strip in North Vancouver, but there's nothing happening in Ambleside," he said, laying blame on the zoning.

Even Harrington wasn't keen on taller towers, but Gabrielle Loren, president of the West Vancouver Chamber of Commerce, didn't mince words.

"The argument that we don't want any big highrises on the waterfront? Well hello, half a block away look at all those highrises," she said.

While she said there were many good businesses in Ambleside, the area feels tired, even "yucky," and needs some new life and new customers, something to draw people in. As well, **she said there's a desperate need for new offices,** something the Safeway site would have provided: **she recently moved her company's offices to Capilano and Marine Drive in North Vancouver, induced by rent that was half that of a similar building in West Vancouver.**

The district has its own dilemma: it needs some density above and beyond what the official community plan offers if it's going to extract a community amenity contribution from developers in exchange for rezoning, as well as getting top dollar for selling the land it owns in the 1300-block - as well as other sites, such as the Gertrude Lawson building, which is already zoned for apartments, and the current main fire hall.

The money is needed **to pay for a new public safety building,** one of the key perks included in the AmblesideNow plan put forward by council. The building, **estimated at \$65 million, would house fire and police services and be built to withstand a serious earthquake.** The goal, said Mayor Pam Goldsmith-Jones, is to pay for it through fees for denser development without dipping into tax money.

The price tag of that building has also attracted its own controversy. The **district has approved \$3.1 million in spending for study of how to build a new integrated public safety building,** but Garrett Polman, a resident who worked in the financial industry, has questioned the lack of any study to determine if a joint police and fire building is feasible.

"My basic concern is these guys have not done their homework properly and they're spending money before they have it," he said. "What happens if they start doing some of those consulting studies and they find out after all that this is not the way to go? In the meantime, they have spent money on this - and that's avoidable."

He also questioned the decision to tap higher density development as a funding source for public infrastructure in a community where that development is so controversial.

Goldsmith-Jones said she recognized the need to take small steps forward, focusing on a handful of sites such as the

1300-block and the Safeway site. She also listed the parking lot behind the stores on the north side of the 1500-block of Ambleside.

"I think a 21st century village is going to require, for sure, a little bit more density. Not a lot at all, just on three sites a few more storeys," she said. "It is an apartment zone."

Still, she said, the goal of council is to go slow and to include the public from the beginning. If that's done, she said, a compromise can be found. "Slow and steady would be my message," she said.

Michael Mortensen, senior development manager at Grosvenor, is the man trying to balance all those competing interests. The company is working with architect James Cheng to design the new building in the 1300-block of Marine Drive, and hosted ideas fairs in the spring to get resident feedback, not just on what type of development they want to see, but also the massing of the site and the shape of the building to the public space and art.

"I think through the process we heard that people don't want the highrise form of development in Ambleside village, so we took that off the table," said Mortensen.

The models they're looking at instead show two-storey frontage on Ambleside, three storeys on Bellevue Avenue and a terraced residential building stepping up to eight storeys in the middle. The centre of the block will likely feature a passageway to better connect Marine Drive to the waterfront.

He emphasized that the company is trying to engage the community at 14th Street and Marine Drive, where grass and trees have been planted to start the process of opening up the long-shuttered lot.

"It's completely underutilized," said Mortensen. He said West Vancouver is ready for something a bit more urban, citing the ideas workshops they hosted.

"Most people in West Vancouver, the majority of people we talked to, gave us a vision we're working with that sees the site as a much more active place," he said.

That's the vision Cameron, one of the participants at that ideas fair, put forth, but it's certainly not the only vision - as West Vancouver is learning.

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