Green Scene: A Sustainable Vision for Port Moody or a Sardine City?

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A Port Moody stream: Slaughterhouse (Dallas) Creek lacks an adequate riparian zone just before flowing into a culvert at St. Johns Street; redevelopment could enhance the creek and daylight its flow through to Rocky Point Park. *Bruce Brandhorst photo*.

Because of the upcoming construction of skytrain through the older historic "downtown" area of Port Moody, the City has decided to re-open their Official Community Plan (OCP) and, until May 10, are soliciting feedback from residents regarding how people feel about massive changes, more high-rise towers and the possibility of another 25,000 people living in this area.

Like many residents of Port Moody, I have always valued its small-town community character coupled with the feeling that nature always seems close at hand. With its geographic centre in Burrard Inlet, the City is graced by a crescent of forested hillsides which shelter and surround the end of the Inlet. With an already rapidly-growing population now approaching 35,000, I shudder to think about the increased traffic that the almost-doubling of the population could bring. We all know we should be using public transit but the reality is that people, even if they ride skytrain or cycle, tend to also drive cars. There is still no better way to haul groceries home or transport children to their various activities. The congestion that another 25,000 people could bring to this part of Port Moody is likely to make timely travel through this area virtually impossible. Worse still, try to imagine cramming several thousand more people into Rocky Point Park on a sunny weekend.

A community is far more than a forest of high-rise towers with shops below and condominiums above. It must also include green spaces, schools, community centres, walking trails, playing fields, dog off-leash areas and, in this part of BC, salmon streams. Unfortunately, this OCP focuses on where the high rise towers will go and provides sparse information on important community amenities. In the previous OCP, it was suggested the sawmill site, if developed, would have towers of only 12 stories - in large part because it is adjacent to an environmentally sensitive waterfront used by several species at risk. A 12 storey limit would also provide some negotiating room should the City decide to use "density bonusing" to obtain community benefits such as requiring the oceanfront part of the sawmill site to be dedicated as a park extension of Rocky Point Park. The new OCP now proposes towers up to 28 stories high on the sawmill site…just what the land-owner demanded and, apparently, got without any further negotiations.

While it may be inevitable that a new skytrain line will result in more high-rise towers, this needs to be done in a manner which will build community values rather than destroy them. New families living in high rises will significantly increase the school population. Yet, the school district is apparently considering selling one of their school sites in the older part of Port Moody. This hardly seems sensible if the new OCP will result in a huge population increase. Sports fields will also be needed. The Port Moody Soccer Club, already facing a shortage of fields, has proposed eliminating much of the coniferous forest in the Shoreline Park to create new fields. Shouldn't this new OCP identify areas where more playing fields could be located to avoid the need to cut down irreplaceable forests on dedicated Park lands?

Another deficiency in this OCP is the failure to show where salmon streams flow, either above ground or in culverts within the areas proposed for redevelopment. It is hard for citizens to advocate for the enhancement of salmon streams if their location remains a mystery. Oddly, there is a draft Chines Stormwater Management Plan being developed by the municipalities of Coquitlam and Port Moody which recommends the daylighting of some of these streams but almost no one at Port Moody City Hall appears to be aware of the plan. Why isn't this plan an important feature of the new OCP?

The new OCP also recommends high rise towers of up to 20 stories along Spring Street and St Johns close to the skytrain station. In addition, because of pressure from some landowners for a highly unlikely third skytrain station, a Western Gateway area is proposed where buildings could reach as high as 12 stories at the corner of the Barnet Highway and Clarke Road. Thirty-storey high rises are proposed for Coronation Park and a site nearby. No doubt, a lot of people will be worried about losing views and having their "sense of place" transformed into a concrete jungle.

Unfortunately, this new OCP appears to have garnered little attention with a headline-getting provincial election also underway. Open Houses hosted by the City provided no opportunity for citizens to post or share their ideas in an open manner. Also of concern are Council's plans to hold the important Public Hearing for this OCP in mid-summer when many people will be out of town and unable to participate. Council should slow down with the adoption of this new OCP, incorporate more community amenities into the plan, integrate it with the Chines Stormwater plan and ensure there is more informed community discussion before locking us into a congestion-filled future. Port Moody residents can provide comments online at www.portmoocycity.ca but only until May 10th.