

Colwood warm on Essencia project

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Single road access, building heights remain concerns

The proponents of Essencia in Colwood say they are committed to finishing what they start.

"I'm not digging a hole in the ground and wrecking the site on a wish and a dream," said UnaVera Resorts CEO Randy Royer. "I have never started a property that I didn't finish because those are economic disasters."

While Essencia has been in the public eye since 2007, it crossed a Colwood committee table for the first time this week. With approval from the planning committee, the proposal, with 40 recommendations, is headed to council Monday, March 9 for rezoning.

The project would transform the former Pacific Family Centre property at 3221 Heatherbell Rd. from a historic single-family estate to a village-style community. Ranging in height from four to 15 storeys, the project proposes condos, commercial and hotel space, as well as underground parking. The existing Pendray House would also be preserved.

"These developers get it. They put their words into action," said Barbara Giuliani, a member of the Coast Collective art gallery, located on the property. "I believe we can trust these developers."

Committee members and residents alike commended the developer's level of public engagement.

Several issues remain, mostly revolving around traffic congestion, emergency egress and construction concerns. Heatherbell Road is the sole access to the site.

Some residents also queried the density — the development will have about 75 residential units and 150 hotel units. Some of the condos will have fractional ownership.

"To me this parcel is the future for generations of children who need nature," said resident Carolyn Taylor-Sly. "If Royal Roads wasn't there we would look like James Bay."

With Aquattro down the road, there is concern that the single road access won't be enough to avoid congestion. Aquattro, with 28 buildings, will see an additional 1,200 residents in the area. That project's maximum building height is 12 storeys, a limit some residents would like to see at Essencia as well.

There is room to negotiate on building height, said project manager Shawn Ripley. Higher buildings do help preserve more greenspace, he said.

If rezoning is approved, UnaVera has committed to keeping 40 per cent of the 11.8-acre site undeveloped. There is no legal obligation to provide parkland, but it will remain public, Royer said. Phased construction would temporarily close areas of the property, but access will be encouraged during build-out, he added.

"This is a resort and the public will have access virtually everywhere," Royer said. "This is an essential piece of the heart of the community and people are used to having that access."

There are advantages to the land remaining private, said Mayor Dave Saunders. There will be no maintenance costs to the City and the entire property can be taxed, he said.

The Calgary-based company said it is also committed to contributing funds to the fire department as well as the repair and maintenance of the Esquimalt Lagoon bridge. Green building initiatives, such as green roofs, geothermal heating and solar panels, are required. Improvements to Heatherbell, Lagoon and Metchosin roads in the form of sidewalks and traffic signals are also required.

With the current economic situation, it's hard to say when construction would begin if approved, Royer said.

There is a market in Colwood for hotel accommodations and conceivably that work would begin within a year of approval. For the condos, two years is a more likely timeframe, he said. Current community use, such as the Coast Collective art gallery and greenhouses, will remain open.

"We were thrilled when we found a property of this nature," Ripley said. "And even more thrilled when we found a community that was so engaged with that property."