

Essencia project in Colwood moving forward



The historic Pendray House is helping to inspire design features at Essencia.

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The transformation of a historic estate on Esquimalt Lagoon into a hub of residential, hotel and commercial space is down to the finer details.

Calgary-based company UnaVera purchased the land at 3221 Heatherbell Rd. two years ago with the intent of developing a village centre known as Essencia on the property. Colwood council approved third reading for necessary changes to the official community plan and zoning May 11.

"This is not just about building buildings," said Randy Roer with UnaVera. "We want to be here after. We want to be part of the community."

While council commended UnaVera for their intensive public consultation process, members of the public reiterated concerns about traffic, building height, loss of views and how a hotel could change the atmosphere of the community. The impact of development on Esquimalt Lagoon itself was also mentioned.

"The transients of the hospitality industry are going to bring quite a bit of instability and traffic to our roads," Greg Sly said.

"I wonder where the tourists are going to go?" questioned Carolyn Taylor-Sly. "There isn't a golf course there, it's a bird sanctuary."

Where they will go is into vehicles to drive to the beach at Esquimalt Lagoon, she said. The traffic on Heatherbell Road, the sole access to the property, is already too heavy and fast, residents agreed.

Clearly some road improvements will have to be done prior to construction for safety reasons, said Coun. Gordie Logan, citing sidewalks in particular. He supports the project, however, based on the amount of green space that is retained.

"(We) need to preserve the green space. In order to do that you need to compromise and the compromise was to have some taller buildings," he said.

First to be developed will be a six-storey building on the south end of the property. To be a mix of residential and commercial, the building will draw design influences from the Pendray House and nearby Hatley Castle, said project manager Shawn Ripley. All of the structures will incorporate rock work with modern influences, he added.

The site was designed to keep cars to a minimum with underground parking near the entrance from Heatherbell Road. From there a series of foot paths will guide people throughout the property.

Extensive restoration work is planned for Bee Creek and the waterfront migratory bird sanctuary land. The green space will remain open to the public.

"I am happy to see a site that could have become a gated community being kept very open (to the public)," said Coun. Judith Cullington.

Council approved third reading of the zoning and OCP changes unanimously. Coun. Brian Tucnott abstained from the rezoning to allow a hotel until he better understood the impact of traffic and building height in relation to tree height, he said, noting he was not against the proposal.

UnaVera will now work with the City on a development agreement before breaking ground, Ripley said. Further public consultation is expected.

To be built in phases, a total of six buildings will house homes, hotel units and restaurants, as well as day care and senior care facilities among others.

The Coast Collective Art Gallery will also continue to operate out of the Pendray House.