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Farmhouse preservation wins hearts on Saltspring

Vancouver developer also saved 100-year-old trees at Summerside

BY PEDRO ARRAIS

Vancouver developer David Sorensen got a head start on the landscaping of his Summerside development on Saltspring Island by about 100 years. By compiling a tree inventory in the design stage, which included a map of each tree's root system, he was able to build around most of them, leaving 85 per cent of the trees standing on the former farm.

These trees, some of which are more than 100 years old, allow the four-year-old development to blend into the existing landscape with minimal intrusion.

"In my company, the environmental consultant is usually the first person to look at a project, then the arborist and finally the civil engineer," says Sorensen, who with his brother John are the principals of Sorensen Fine Homes.

He says that he is successful in preserving the treescape of a lot because he takes the time — sometimes up to eight months — to study the topography of a site before he decides on road access placement.

Sorensen, whose company has also developed the 41-lot King Edward Bay project on a less than 19 1/2 hectares (48 acres) of second-growth forest on the west side of Bowen Island, won the hearts of Saltspring Island heritage conservationists by preserving the original 1912 farmhouse that came with the property.

The partially restored building includes two guest suites, which residents can book when they have overnight company, and also serves as a central clubhouse with an adjacent indoor saltwater pool.

The farmhouse also served as the design model for the arts and crafts-style on the 2.22-hectare property, says Sorensen.

The development has been built and marketed over four years. Units in the first phase were about 1,300 square feet and now are valued at \$320,000. The phase being sold now features larger homes. Townhouses of 1,850 square feet are listed at \$425,000 and offer two bedrooms and a den on three levels, with 3 1/2 baths and a single garage.

Inside, you'll find gas fireplaces, wood-framed windows, granite countertops and a choice of stainless steel appliances.

Summerside is not the only multi-family project on Saltspring.

Victoria-based Three Point Properties has developed the Bishop's Walk and Bishop's Green subdivision just south of Ganges.

Bishop's Walk will comprise 27 lots on land formerly owned by the Catholic Diocese of Victoria. The first phase, now nearing completion, will offer 15 lots ranging between about 0.2 and 0.5 hectares and priced from \$268,000 to \$379,000.

Bishop's Green consists of upscale two-bedroom, two-bath homes, ranging

Continued on the next page

At David Sorensen's Summerside new-home project on Saltspring Island (this page and the previous page), history and geography informed design decisions, exterior and interior.

Living areas are bright and spacious — these are “island retreats” — with gas-burning fireplaces that provide focus, comfort and warmth. Kitchens feature granite countertops, a choice of stainless steel appliances and wood-framed windows.

Sorensen opted to preserve a 95-year-old farmhouse, which now contains two guest suites that residents can book for overnight guests. It also serves as a central clubhouse with an adjacent indoor saltwater swimming pool.



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from 1,817 to 2,477 square feet. Duplexes start at \$500,000, while single-family houses run up to \$736,000.

Allan Bruce, a realtor with Creek House Realty on Saltspring, sees a need for developments such as Summerside and Bishop's Green.

“Saltspring residents are very conservative and don't like change. It takes a while for any change to sink in,” says Bruce. “We need a little bit of sophistication locally, something that would appeal to locals downsizing as well as out-of-town buyers.”

One such newcomer is Gary Morrison, one of the first purchasers in Summerside and the strata council president. He and his wife Vicki had retired in the Okanagan, but missed the coast.

“We wanted a place with cultural richness, a place with vibrancy that had a cross-section of different people,” says Morrison. He says he was attracted to Saltspring Island's sense of community without displaying a small-town mentality.

Morrison was attracted by the ensuite bathroom for each bedroom. “When you live on Saltspring, you are definitely going to have guests.”

The island attracts its fair share of visitors. While the year-round population hovers around 10,000, in the summer that number usually doubles, according to island resident Erica Ross.

“People come to Saltspring because of the peaceful, rural atmosphere,” says Ross.

While the demand to build new houses has kept developers and realtors happy, Ross says some new homes remain empty for most of the year. Some stand vacant until their owners retire to the island in a few years; others are used as summer homes.

This demand for summer homes has contributed to the high cost of housing. In the past 10 years, the average price for a single-family house on the Gulf Islands has more than doubled to \$558,841 from \$248,903 in 1996, according to figures from the Victoria Real Estate Board. Townhouse prices have risen more spectacularly, more than tripling in value to \$485,077 from \$155,238.

The boom in real estate values is hurting businesses trying to find staff, because workers can't find anywhere to live.

“I am having a heck of a time finding help because affordable rentals are almost impossible to find,” says Alf Reda, manager of the Fulford Inn in Ganges. He says it does not help when residents turn their houses into bed-and-breakfast operations and turn their basement suites — which used to be rented by workers — into short-term rental rooms.

Island residents soon might see more multi-family residential developments. Residential density is an issue to be addressed in the next official community plan, says Saltspring Island trustee Peter Lamb. The plan, tentatively due at the end of this year, will look at the need for more concentrated residential projects, which would include subsidized housing near Ganges and Fulford Harbour, Lamb says.

He hopes that the community plan can meet the housing needs of renters. “The limited rental market is a concern on the island.”

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