

Salt Spring project casting long shadow

Islanders worry about environmental impact of village

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Developers of a \$200-million housing project on Salt Spring Island, B.C. have some advice for out-of-province investors who want successful, hassle-free developments.

Pay attention to community concerns and minimize environmental impact.

Highbridge, a village of about 400 residences and 50 commercial spaces, not only has been planned for lighter environmental impact, but those plans have been altered to address community concerns, says Jim Rogers, the new president of Channel Ridge Properties.

"It's important we do this development right," says Rogers. Channel Ridge involved about 60 consultants to make sure that happened.

"Everybody on the team realized the essence of Salt Spring is why you come to Salt Spring," says Mark Holland, of Holland Barrs Planning Group and the project's sustainable development adviser. "If you don't respond to what's important in Salt Spring, you risk creating something that doesn't feel like Salt Spring."

So the design team paid particular attention to water, waste treatment and traffic flow – important aspects of a sustainable community.

"Without sustainability, you don't have a sustainable community – (one) based on people living, working, raising kids and all the things they're involved in to do so," says Eric Booth, one of Salt Spring's Islands Trust directors. Booth's parents moved to the island in 1949, making his children third-generation Salt Springers.

Islanders have concerns about the impact of large developments on already-taxed resources and how abruptly increasing its population will change the island lifestyle.

And while some want no change at all, others understand the pressures that will come to bear on the community as the supply of developable land on the West Coast dries up, says Kimberly Lineger, the second Salt Spring representative on the Islands Trust.

Booth hopes the community will investigate even more aspects of sustainability to guide future development on the island while keeping it livable for current residents now and in the future.

The Gulf Islands are tourist and retirement meccas because they offer the care-worn urbanite a place to savour the values and pace of an old-fashioned way of life, all the while surrounded by stunning natural beauty. Holland describes that feeling as "magic."

But it is all too easy to break the spell. One certain way is to try to plunk suburban neighbourhoods into the landscape. Such developments, often funded by Albertans, are now cropping up in Victoria, Nanaimo and Courtenay – developments that can be found everywhere and don't have the "island" atmosphere.

That was an initial worry about Highbridge. Many of the 304 Channel Ridge Properties investors, who bought the 1,433-acre property in 2001 for \$7.1 million, are Albertans. So are about two-thirds of the 800 people who've said they are interested in buying a home there.

Prairie dwellers call this the "wet coast," but don't realize that rainfall is seasonal, there are areas of rainshadow, groundwater is in short supply particularly on the islands, and summer water restrictions are a way of life. Salt Spring gets an average of only 84 centimetres of rain annually.

Non-islanders also don't appreciate island topography – shallow soil over rock base – makes sewage treatment and waste disposal more expensive. Garbage is routinely, and expensively, hauled off islands to mainland landfill sites.

The population of one large development can also change the local way of life. Highbridge village is expected to add about 1,200 people to Salt

Spring Island's population of about 10,000. It will be a third population centre on the 27x14-kilometre island where traffic congestion is already a concern.

"Highbridge has to be an extension of the urban, social and physical geography of Salt Spring," says Holland. "We didn't want it to look like a regular suburb for a thousand reasons."

During the summer, Channel Ridge held community meetings to listen to islanders' concerns, and some of the plans have been altered as a result.

For example, "fractional ownership" has been abandoned. Islanders maintain that a robust community life calls for full-time residents.

In answer to worries about appearance, each building will be worked into the site in a slightly different way and the building clusters will have eight different designs and colour schemes. But still, their similarity will stand out in a community with largely one-of-a-kind local housing, says Booth.

A second village access road is now being considered to answer concerns about traffic congestion and egress during emergencies, says Rogers. In addition, "the Island Trust has a list of things that must be satisfied – including an archeological audit," he says.

Rogers hopes development permits will be issued by the end of the year so sales can begin in early 2005.

The 405 units will include townhouses, single-family homes and condominiums built over a five- to eight-year period.

It will be concentrated over 90 acres, leaving most of the site for preservation and recreation. Channel Ridge plans to maintain arbutus groves, reclaim threatened Garry oaks meadows and provide 300 kilometres of hiking trails to tempt residents outdoors.

The village core design calls for cobblestone streets with residences above the shops, galleries and ateliers, as in European villages.

A key feature is a water recovery system to direct rain from all the rooftops to a cistern to store potable water.

"With the water conservation plan," says Booth, "units in Highbridge will use 30- to 50 per cent less water than the average."

"This contributes to making the whole island sustainable," adds Holland.

As well, water from the village's sewage treatment plant will be recovered for subsurface landscaping irrigation.

Traffic and road access continue to be a concern, but Highbridge will concentrate population and provide local services.

"People won't have to get in their car to drive into Ganges every time they need something, taking a burden off transportation," says Holland.

Both long-term and new islanders do not want Salt Spring to suffer Whistler's fate – the super-rich buying out the rich, so working people cannot afford to live in the community where they earn their living.

There are homeless people on Salt Spring, where demand, particularly from Prairie and U.S. residents, has pushed housing prices sharply higher. Development and density will continue to be hot island issues.

"We hope Highbridge will set a new standard for developments," says Holland, who also serves on the board of directors of the Ecodesign Resource Society and the B.C. Energy Aware Committee.

To Booth, diversity is an important part of a sustainable community, and can be maintained in the face of short land supply by increasing density and designating affordable community housing. "Cluster housing (like that in the Highbridge design) allows for that." There are only about 2,000 developable lots left on the island, says Booth, with room perhaps for 3,000 more houses.

"Highbridge will get people thinking" about how best to manage remaining development, he said.

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