

## Lower Lonsdale is highrise heaven

The following is the first of a two-part series concerning development around the foot of Lonsdale Avenue.

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From Barbara Groundwater's eighth-floor balcony, a panorama of the North Vancouver waterfront stretches from the Lions Gate Bridge, shimmering in the distance, to the freighters in the harbour and the grain silos to the east.

From here, you can look down to where the skeletal frames of the old Versatile Pacific Shipyards buildings still stand, or watch the SeaBus heading in near Lonsdale Quay, framed by the sails of the Pan Pacific across Burrard Inlet. It's a view marketers dream of, and one that's featured in the sales brochures and websites of condominium developments now going up in Lower Lonsdale.

To the west, behind the tower of the Observatory residential building that was permitted to replace the old St. Alice Hotel in the late 1980s, two cranes are framed against construction of new highrise towers. Down on West First Street, the sound of hammers and power tools echo between the Time highrise development on the south side of the street and One Park Place on the north. Beyond the slim trees leafing in Jack Loucks Court, a giant excavation for Sky highrise, the next condominium tower, has already taken shape.

When she moved into the area 13 years ago, "we expected development," said Groundwater. She didn't necessarily expect this much, this fast. "They keep pushing it to the limit."

North Vancouver City Mayor Barbara Sharp doesn't share those feelings. After years of studies, public meetings, and debate, it's time to make Lower Lonsdale a vibrant place to be, said Sharp. "The city had been studying the whole Lower Lonsdale area for years," said Sharp. "You want to make sure that you do something very exciting."

Among those building sites between Lonsdale and Chesterfield avenues, 500 new residential condo units are currently under construction on lands sold by the city in the past four years. And that's just the beginning. In the next three to five years, a total of 1,600 to 1,700 new residential units are expected to bring about 5,000 people into the Lower Lonsdale area.

"Right now as soon as someone announces a project, they're sold," said city planner Richard White. "There's a lot of interest in development right now."

In November of last year, the city closed a deal on its fourth site to go on the market, where Sky, a 20-storey 153-unit residential tower will now be built.

The deal, which netted the city almost \$9 million, was the largest land sale ever completed by the municipality. The future condo tower by Seagate Properties has sold quickly, before the excavation was even finished on the site.

"There's lots of demand," said Chris Philips, president of Seagate and Fairmont Pacific Properties. Philips should know. His companies were first in on redevelopment of city

lands in Lower Lonsdale, with the purchase of Site 4, later the 12-storey Q building, on West First Street in 2000 for \$2.3 million.

In the same block, Time, also being developed by Seagate, is one of the largest parcels ever sold by the city.

It sold in 2002 for \$8.4 million. There, 268 residential units are being built in two towers. The development also includes the new IGA and Shoppers Drug Mart and a 34,000 square-foot community centre that will be turned over to the city to run when it's finished this summer.

Across the street, construction of 117 condo units at One Park Lane by Millennium Developments is expected to be ready by 2005. That site was sold a year ago for \$5.7 million.

It's a stunning concentration of activity in a city landscape previously dominated by parking lots and vacant land. Prices for the residential units going up have ranged from \$150,000 for some of the studio condos to up to \$700,000 for the penthouse suites.

"It's very much a desirable community," said Philps. "The market has borne that out."

The development boom has also been good for city coffers, bringing the municipality more than \$25.2 million in the past four years in land sales alone. Some of that money has been earmarked for projects like the community centre being built in the Time development and the future museum that will be part of the Pier waterfront project.

Other money has been socked away to earn interest in city reserve funds.

It wasn't always this way.

For much of North Vancouver's history, areas close to the waterfront were heavily industrial. At one time, there were 20 acres of mostly-vacant land within a couple of blocks of the waterfront, 13 of those owned by the city.

"For the most part it was purchased by people and never built on," said White. The city acquired most of the land after owners didn't pay their taxes.

Development controls were few and far between because nobody was interested in building. But with construction of the SeaBus terminal, ICBC building and Lonsdale Quay, that changed.

For the community, the predictable rude awakening came when the site of the St. Alice Hotel, a landmark in the 100-block West Second Street was sold to Cressey Development who decided to tear it down and put up a 30-storey highrise. The tower, whose height was permitted under the wording then in place for highrises, got the OK by council after much community acrimony. Today, the Observatory, at 280 feet tall, remains by far the tallest building in the area. In the ensuing public outcry, a height restriction was included in the Official Community Plan for the area that limited buildings to 75 feet - about eight storeys. Planners and community members also started thinking about what they might like to see in Lower Lonsdale. The result was an exhaustive Lower Lonsdale planning study that continued to 1997. "It was a long and tough discussion," said White, including not just issues like how high

buildings should be, but what sort of commercial and residential mix people wanted in the city.

"It was a political process driven by a lot of different interests," said White.

The eventual plan forecast a mix of residential and commercial buildings in the Lower Lonsdale area and also advocated the controversial idea that some strategically-placed highrise towers would be better than a lot of low-rise developments. "If you wind up with a lot of low-rise buildings roughly the same height, you're going to wind up blocking a lot of people's views completely," said White.

There were studies that examined the form of buildings and emphasized view corridors between various highrise sites.

"Not everybody bought that argument," said White. "Some people said you should just make them all short."

Ivan Leonard, a member of the Lonsdale Citizens Association, is one of the doubters. "There's always been a fear we'd build a wall right across our waterfront," said Leonard.

Jim Ramsay, another member of the association, also questions whose views the view corridors are protecting. Emphasis has been on

protecting views from other highrises, said Ramsay. "Public views aren't given so much consideration."

As it turned out, however, it was the decision to change the balance of the Time project on the former city site 5 to take out some commercial space and replace it with more residential that proved especially controversial.

"We didn't think it was viable," Philips said of the original plan. "The demand is for residential. People want to live down here."

The shift to more residential development is one of the trends members of the Lonsdale Citizens Association aren't pleased with.

"Residential is the flavour of the month right now," said Ramsay. But those people still need places to shop, to work and to go sit outside, he said.

"You can't just decide let's throw in a few residential towers here."

Sharp argues key features of the Time site - including a grocery store, pharmacy, community centre and public plaza - have been retained.

"Those were the key things people told us they wanted there and they're there," she said. "You don't just put in commercial enterprise for the sake of putting in commercial enterprise." Ramsay said he was among those who argued for public space in the plan like Jack Loucks Court that now sits between the buildings on West Second. But even that is "still not very green," he says.

Sharp said the basic plan for Lower Lonsdale is still valid, despite some changes that have been made. "The plan is fluid. They've always got to have some fluidity to them."

Andrea Lebowitz, another member of the citizens group, sees it in slightly different terms. "We had a plan, but it goes out the window every time a good offer comes along," said Lebowitz. "I think it's not going to end up being as pleasant a place to live as it could have been."