

Hastings Street project a chance to create a real neighbourhood

Not-social-housing households would diversify
east side population, attract new business



BOB RANSFORD
SPECIAL TO WESTCOAST HOMES

REAL ESTATE MATTERS

Concord Pacific plans to build a new condominium project in the heart of the Downtown Eastside.

Its project on 11 vacant lots on Hastings Street will see 160 condominiums and eight ground-floor retail shops in a new seven-storey mixed-use building at ground zero in Vancouver's most unreal neighbourhood.

The proposed development complies with the site's zoning and the city's development guidelines for the area. The majority of the proposed condominiums will be of a smaller size — the majority between 540 and 795 square feet — likely appealing to first-time buyers and other middle-income earners.

At the end of June, the city's Development Permit Board approved the development on the condition that Concord continues to communicate and consult with the Downtown Eastside community on design improvements.

Activists in the Downtown Eastside are vehemently opposing the project. They've held protests and are lobbying local politicians to kill the project. They are manning the ramparts to protect what is an unreal neighbourhood.

The 58 West Hastings St. site is located on the south side of Hastings Street between Abbott and Carrall streets.

Immediately adjacent to the site is the 10-storey New Portland Hotel, which houses more than 80 homeless adults. Directly behind the site on Pender Street is a seven-storey social housing building. The site is a half-

block kitty-corner from the new Woodward's development, which has 200 units of social housing under construction.

The city's Downtown Eastside Housing Plan envisions protecting the area, primarily as a low-income community where the amount of low-income housing stock, currently at about 10,000 units, remains constant. Meanwhile, the plan recognizes there will be an increasing amount of market housing projected over the next 10 years. This will begin to make the Downtown Eastside a more real neighbourhood.

Vancouver's downtown core has reached a saturation point when it comes to residential development and new development is now moving east. There are a number of new projects being developed in the Downtown Eastside area. It is estimated that between 2003 and the end of 2010, the pace of development in the area will see about the same number of new non-market units built as new market homes — around 1,900 to 2,000 of each.

Integrating market housing in the Downtown Eastside has long been an objective of a number of deliberate planning efforts aimed at trying to improve the quality of life for the disproportionate number of disadvantaged people living in the neighbourhood's many social housing and low-income rental buildings.

Developing a community with a good supply and range of housing types, both market and non-market, including rental and affordable condo ownership units, will help to support a more diverse community in the Downtown Eastside.

Diversifying the social spectrum will mean street-level businesses will become more viable, providing more service commercial uses for the existing low-income residents of the area and new residents.

An active street with viable businesses means increased community safety.

With the pride of ownership comes a commitment to neighbourhood stewardship that leads to cleaner and safer

Opponents fear reduction of services

BOB RANSFORD

From L3

streets. This is all part of making the Downtown Eastside neighbourhood a more real neighbourhood.

Apart from these benefits that will flow from an increase in the amount of market housing in the Downtown Eastside is the benefit this kind of inner-city redevelopment brings for our regional efforts to encourage housing close to work and to create livable, vibrant, safe and less-car dependent downtown neighbourhoods. In other words — real neighbourhoods.

Real neighbourhoods have people at all income levels, at all stages of their

lives with a wide range of abilities and disabilities. Real neighbourhoods have storefronts that house viable businesses, community services and social services.

Activists who oppose this kind of change label it, pejoratively, "gentrification." They argue that gentrification will see new higher-income residents put pressure on causing change that will rid the neighbourhood of services for low-income people.

Some have argued that any change that uproots low-income people from their haven in the Downtown Eastside threatens other neighbourhoods in the city because the Downtown Eastside is the last stop for the disadvantaged and

homeless.

There is a real irony in that last argument.

Would we be talking about how we can make the Downtown Eastside a more diverse and healthier neighbourhood through gentrification if other neighbourhoods in the city had honoured their obligations and accepted their share of the social housing that we have so long relegated to the Downtown Eastside, making it an unreal neighbourhood?

*Bob Ransford is a public affairs consultant with Counterpoint Communications Inc. He is a former real estate developer who specializes in urban land use issues.
E-mail: ransford@counterpoint.ca*