

**Condo raises bar in downtown Nanaimo
But tower's effect on waterfront view drawing criticism
By Sharon Adams - Business Edge
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While controversy continues over a downtown Nanaimo revitalization project approved by a narrow margin in a November referendum, one related development is being greeted with widespread enthusiasm and relief.

Cape Development Corp.'s \$50- million Pacifica waterfront development will go up on the site of the old Malaspina Hotel, a decade after it was abandoned in mid-construction leaving an empty shell behind.

I can hardly wait, says Cynthia Chandler, owner of Cynthia's Wardrobe, located on Front Street. We have a beautiful downtown aside from the abandoned building site, but it's like pulling teeth to get people to come down here.



Courtesy Cape Development Corp.

A well-planned, attractive residential development could change that, and change the retail climate in the downtown core, where businesses depending on local traffic now largely languish. Chandler looks forward to building a more local clientele: She estimates 60 per cent of her clients come from hotels, the marina and floatplanes.

It'll be good for tourism, too, says David Petryk, president of Tourism Vancouver Island.

When people arrive in Nanaimo by boat, HarbourLynx ferry or float plane, their first impression is that absolute eyesore.

The new Pacifica waterfront complex, above, will become the centrepiece of Nanaimo's downtown redevelopment, going up on the site of the old Malaspina Hotel property, left, that was abandoned a decade ago in mid- construction.

The derelict property is located on the waterfront where the ferry and floatplanes land and steps away from the marina where visiting yachts moor. The parks, broad walkway and public spaces are strung along the city's waterfront like pearls on a necklace, and the abandoned building sticks out like a lump of coal.

The upscale 20-storey development, with its harbourfront townhomes and landscaped lot, will give a first impression of a prosperous city, more progressive and affluent, says Petryk.



With this development, Nanaimo has come of age, says Bill Wright, principal of Cape Development of Richmond. This development is going to raise Nanaimo's stock to the same level as Coal Harbour on the mainland and Victoria's Inner Harbour.

But prices will be between 30 and 40 per cent cheaper than the exclusive addresses in the larger cities. And buyers will be treated to more unique residential design than in those locales, said Wright.

Initially intended to accommodate offices, the shell that remains dictates 15-foot ceilings. Turning the existing structure into habitable space was a challenge for the architects, said Wright, but allowed for design elements not normally part of a residential plan.

The extra height can accommodate live/work units with lofts, for example. Townhomes are planned both at ground level, giving direct access to the spectacular harbourfront walkway, and on the top storeys, with spectacular views of either the city and Mount Benson or the harbour, the smaller islands and Georgia Strait.

Two weeks after sales opened, a quarter of the residences had been sold, and although there are only 137 units, more than 300 people had expressed interest in buying. People are buying (units) sight unseen from the condo centre in Vancouver, reports realtor Kathy White, who helps staff the project's downtown Nanaimo sales centre.

Construction is slated to begin in January or February, when half the units are expected to have been sold, and the building will be ready for occupancy in the spring of 2006.

Cape will add eight storeys to the above-ground shell now in place. Prices range from \$203,000 to \$571,000 and units are sized from 770 to 1,450 sq. ft.

In the downtown core, what's needed for healthy sustainability is people to be shopping 12 months of the year, going to the coffee shops and art galleries, says Wright.

This project will deliver such a population, but not everyone is thrilled with the development.

The group opposed to the convention centre/hotel revitalization project, which passed in a referendum by 975 votes of 23,660 cast, wants the city to design and pursue a comprehensive downtown design featuring human-scale projects instead of structures 20 storeys high or a whole block long. Aside from the convention centre, plans call for new twin arenas and another condominium development on the current civic arena site.

The group, Friends of Plan Nanaimo, did not wish to comment for this story, referring Business Edge instead to the person commissioned by them to develop an alternate urban design plan for the whole downtown.

Cape Development's plan, a 20-storey building at the bottom of the slope, goes against best urban planning principles, said urban design specialist Lewis Villegas.

If you're going to build a tower, it should go at the top of a hill rather than at the bottom. A tower built at the bottom of a hill blocks the view from uphill and flattens out the contours of the city.

He urges Nanaimo to consider terracing and maintaining the profile of the hill, rather than allowing a wall of tall buildings to proliferate along the water.

Any downtown development will have an effect on somebody's view, even if it's in the distance, said White, of Coast Realty and a member of the Downtown Revitalization Committee, which supported the convention centre/hotel project approved by 52 per cent of the referendum voters.

She pointed out the development is already surrounded by offices and businesses and the downtown commercial district is a buffer between Pacifica and residential neighbourhoods.

But Villegas said it is one building that could set the tone for future development – and future community conflict. The marketplace is looking for high-level waterfront development, but by considering development of an area as a whole, rather than site-by-site, it is possible to achieve the same density as a 20-storey building in 4 1/2-storey terraces designed to take full advantage of topography.

A lower development also brings sunlight to the streets all around, and offers more street-front entries, making the streets safer and providing more opportunities for social interaction than if all residents are funnelled through one doorway.

But neighbours of the derelict ruin downtown say any attractive development is better than what exists now.

It's absolutely wonderful, says Chandler, who for 10 years has either worked or owned a business close to the ruin. The sooner all this happens, the better.