

Village centre concept 'too vague'

Deep divisions over North Saanich's official community plan concern development

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The controversial concept of three village centres in North Saanich will be back before council in mid-September, and will include recommendations made by dozens of passionate residents.

"Something has to be fixed, that's quite clear," Mayor Ted Daly said Wednesday.

Some 800 North Saanich residents jammed the Mary Winspear Centre on Tuesday night, booing, catcalling, cheering, clapping and giving partial standing ovations, depending on what was being said and whether they agreed with it.

After four hours of listening to heated comments, council unanimously voted to refer the draft Official Community Plan to staff to prepare a report, including recommended amendments based on comments received from the public.

The meeting was called to deal with the draft revision of the OCP, but the real issue was proposed village centres at three sites: West Saanich and Wain roads; East Saanich and McTavish roads, and on Canora Road, known as the Rideau Village Centre.

While many in the crowd were against any type of development in the community -- several people dramatically likened North Saanich to becoming another Langford -- many others said the



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Farms and rural properties are a common sight in North Saanich. Most residents want to see the ambience preserved.



wording in the draft OCP was simply too vague to know how the centres would end up.

The OCP is to be reviewed every five years. As part of the review, the concept of three village centres was suggested in 2004 by the previous council. Questionnaires were sent out and open houses held.

Each site calls for slightly different developments, designed around becoming "community gathering places," with businesses compatible with the rural environment.

To some, this is a small country market, maybe a doctor's office and a coffee shop. Others see a strip mall adjacent to high-density housing that will clog the country roads with more traffic.

Part of the problem is what a village centre would look like, and what uses would be allowed, were not clearly defined. In the draft OCP, it says "permitted uses for this village include, but are not limited to the following."

That's "far too vague and subjective," said resident Jo Doman.

And where there was uncertainty, there was suspicion. Resident Hugh Richards said a "siege mentality" has taken hold of the community, fuelled by suspicion. Residents don't move to North Saanich for the convenience shopping, Richards said, but rather to "listen to the evening birdsong in the hedgerows."

"This is not a plan, but a blank cheque book for council to do whatever they want," said Bob Steel.

Petitions have been flying around the community. One with more than 1,000 signatures of people against village centres was presented Tuesday night, as was another with almost 500 names in favour of village centres "as long as they don't look like strip malls."

Daly said he doesn't think people will be that far apart once a few issues are resolved. In his view, the meeting showed that the

wording needs to be clarified and better communicated to the public.

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