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Trio of designs unveiled for Great Northern Way Campus

Plans for possible Metro Vancouver technology incubator strike balance between academic, commercial and living space

Curt Cherewayko

The Great Northern Way Campus (GNWC) is using three designs developed during charrette last month to develop a draft plan for the 2.5-million-square-foot campus that could be ready by late September.

The campus is still a long way from being built, but the three concepts – unveiled June 21 at an open house at the campus – are the first designs to be presented publicly.

They varied in their ratios of land use, but a common conclusion among the three design teams – which included architects, landscape architects, economists, students and sustainability specialists – was the need to strike a balance between residential, commercial and academic space on the grounds.

The plans also emphasized sustainability and public transit use.

“To create vibrancy here, especially around job creation, we need a lot of space allocated for commercial use,” said Dennis Pavlich, GNWC’s president. “We must [also] make it complete with people living here.”

Pavlich noted that the campus will have affordable housing.

“Businesses will want to relocate here if there’s a variety of housing styles and a strong sense of place.”

The campus’ board will draft a plan that uses elements from each of the charrette designs.

The plan will then be presented to the city for approval, before being presented publicly.

That could happen as early as this winter, although a budget and details on the sources of development capital could be sorted out months later.

“We’re in a hurry,” said Pavlich. “This is not something that’s going to drift endlessly.”

Finning International Corp. (TSX: FTT) donated the roughly 20 acres of False Creek Flats land that make up GNWC’s campus to a consortium of Vancouver post-secondary schools in November 2001. But the property is still largely barren industrial land.

Two of the charrette designs worked within GNWC’s current zoning scheme, which includes about 1.9 million square feet of space for incubators and businesses, 50,000 square feet of street-level commercial space and 280,000 square feet of residential space.

Team A centred its design around an “agora” – a town square or events space that would be the heart of the campus.

Team B envisioned the campus as an academic creative garage, where the act of “making” is visible.

Team C departed from the current zoning restrictions. It envisioned a dense cluster of buildings on the west side of the grounds that would include roughly one million square feet of residential and 600,000 square feet of commercial space.

“Although we have the 2.5 million [square feet], there has to be some change in the description of what that land use permits,” said Pavlich.

He pointed out that most of the campus land is zoned as I-3, an industrial designation that Pavlich calls “absolutely hopeless.”

“The land-use description is so restrictive and so inflexible that nobody is going to take the risk of purchasing land here knowing that they’re not going to be able to operate as high-tech companies do today, without violating the current zoning rules.”

Nancy Knight, a GNWC director and an associate vice-president at the University of British Columbia’s department of campus and community planning, noted that the board didn’t intend to draw any concrete conclusions from the charrette.

She said charrettes are designed to generate a broad range of ideas for use in a subsequent planning process.

Knight added that the charrette emphasized the campus’ importance in setting a tone for the development of the rest of the False Creek Flats.

“We don’t [want to] become an empty place once the work hours are finished for the day.” •

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