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Victoria gives roundhouse development green light

Hotel, condos and retail slated for historic Vic West site

Carolyn Heiman, Times Colonist

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Victoria gives roundhouse development green light

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Your Times Colonist

Published: Friday, July 25, 2008

A new chapter was written last night for the historic railway roundhouse site in Victoria's Vic West neighbourhood.

Victoria city council okayed far-reaching development plans for the brownfield site that will save one of Canada's last railway roundhouses and a railway corridor in exchange for the right to build a 180-unit hotel, 460-unit condominium and a suite of retail services on the 4.25-hectare site.

Plans for the site owned by Canadian Pacific Railway have been in the works for years, beginning with developer Ken Mariash taking an option to buy the property in 2003 and followed by rounds of community meetings and at least 17 studies. The \$250-million project is expected to take 10 years to build.

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The Roundhouse development could be a first for Victoria, with a working rail line and the historic buildings associated with it the centrepiece of a billion-dollar revamping of the Vic West site.

Adrian Lam, Times Colonist



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Letters in support of the project overwhelmed the council package. Almost the lone voice of opposition came from Sasha Kvakic, president of the nearby Tyee Housing Co-operative, who said council should have insisted on some affordable housing in the project. "A time is fast approaching when working families will no longer be able to live in Victoria proper," she wrote. Mayor Alan Lowe and Coun. Geoff Young voted in favor of the project although each shared reservations. Young said his first choice for the property would have been to have a large government grant that would have allowed a society to run a railway museum but he recognized that those museums don't make money. Lowe said some of the buildings are too high. Architect Norm Hotson said the developer only had about half of the site to put buildings on given the area taken up by the heritage structures. The limited building area demanded that larger buildings be put on the site to make it economically viable.

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In exchange for being able to develop the site, Roundhouse Properties Limited Partnership has agreed to a long list of public amenities in the area.

The costliest amenities include remediation of contaminated soil and refurbishing five heritage buildings on the site - some built in 1913 and in desperate need of repair - that include the roundhouse, boiler house and car shop along with the turntable. Mariash estimated those costs to be \$20- to \$40 million.

Other amenities include historic interpretive features, public space, a pedestrian and cyclist-friendly greenway adjacent to the rail line, community space in a historic building and space for artisans. They also include retention of the rail corridor in perpetuity for rail or transit use, provision of a transit pass to every residence for three years and change and shower facilities for employees who cycle or walk to work.

No resident spoke in opposition of the project. Still Coun. Pam Madoff was the sole councillor to vote against the rezoning and change to the official community plan saying the heritage buildings have been made an afterthought in the site planning and shadowing from the towers on the site would likely preclude it being an enjoyable atmosphere.

"I hope my impression of this development is wrong," Madoff said.

Vic West resident Grant Keddy echoed the views of several speakers who commended the developer on the design and lengthy public consultation.

The city asked a consultant to weigh if the amenities were a fair exchange for being able to build about 800,000 square feet of residential, hotel and commercial space on the land.

In a June 8 letter to council, Jay Wollenberg of Coriolos Consulting Corp. cautioned council from asking for additions to the benefit package "considering the complexity, uncertainty, and high up-front costs" associated with the project.

But he noted the city needed to do more to secure and define some of the commitments to ensure they happen. He singled out the need for assurances that the heritage and open-space obligations be done before building condominiums, something that has since been written into the 85-page Master Development Agreement.

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