

COWICHAN NEWS LEADER PICTORIAL

Bamberton plug pulled

By John McKinley - Cowichan News Leader Pictorial

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Mill Bay Malahat Director Brian Harrison listens as CVRD development services manager Rob Conway spells out the reasons staff recommended the rejection of the ambitious Bamberton proposal. Instead Harrison recommended sending a dramatically stripped version of the project to his area advisory planning commission for consideration.

John McKinley

And just like that, Bamberton Mark II was gone.

After an investment of more than five years and \$35 million, Three Point Properties essentially pulled the plug on the majority of its 3,200-home residential development proposal Monday at the Cowichan Valley Regional District office.

Instead, at Three Point's request, the CVRD will consider a drastically stripped proposal focusing only on the business and industrial aspects of the project at the village site and proposed business park near the Trans-Canada Highway.

"There might be an appetite for (residential development) years down the road, but it is dead right now," Three Point spokesperson Ross Tennant said. "I think we were crestfallen in a lot of ways, but this is a really strategic property for the community and we have an important role to play.

"We're heartbroken, but we're looking forward."

The decision came in the wake of a CVRD staff report that recommended Bamberton be rejected because the developers had not been able to provide the community with the certainty it needed.

Lead author Rob Conway said Three Point's most recent Bamberton proposal had many positive features and staff regretted the report focusing on the negative.

But the shifting focus of the proposal, lack of service development and sustainability guarantees, and the sheer scope — in terms of both detail and its 20-year-plus time frame — were concerns.

"Our understanding was that a community of this size would need to be self-funded," he said. "Even with changes to the application, the administrative burden would be considerable and ongoing."

Tennant said many of the CVRD concerns could be addressed, but not all of them, at least within what the current economic conditions and time frame allowed. With an election looming this year potentially creating more uncertainty, it was time to pull back.

"We had a window of opportunity and that window closed," he said.

Instead, Three Point chose to shelve the proposal and concentrate on what investors believe to be the aspect that has received the most support — the creation of job opportunities and an expanded tax base for Cowichan's south end.

While both the developer and the CVRD agreed it was the right move given their respective realities, the decision left few in the audience feeling happy. Bamberton was a rare chance to build a planned, sustainable community from the ground floor up. It had also come with promises of a 300-acre waterfront park and considerable investment into area infrastructure like the Kerry Park Rec Centre.

Many had been tantalized by the opportunity to create something special.

"I'm feeling almost this sense of grief that something is being lost here," Cowichan Lake South Director Ian Morrison said.

"After all this time I just can't understand how this could happen," Youbou's Klaus Kuhn added.

"If this board is at all interested in saving agricultural land, then development on the hillside is the way to go," Cobble Hill Director Gerry Giles said.

"I too am disappointed," Saltair's Mel Dorey said. "I'm a little surprised you didn't meet the high level of detail and degree of certainty this project demanded."

Three Point investor Jack Julseth said he wanted to make it clear a considerably smaller proposal would force amenities like the park off the table.

"Obviously, this is devastating. We've failed. There is no question of that," Julseth said. "There is no winner here. If you think this is about 'how much more can we get out of the developer,' there is just nothing left."

Malahat chief Michael Harry told the CVRD its decision jeopardized the potentially fruitful partnership his band had cultivated with Three Point.

"We're amazed, just blown away that it has come to this," he said.

Even members of the Friends of Saanich Inlet, the small residents group that formed to halt the project, weren't satisfied.

FOSI chairman Balu Tatachari said the reduced development proposal amounted to a brand-new

application that still failed to take into account what the public wants.

"As far as I'm concerned, (the CVRD) threw a drowning man an anchor," fellow FOSI member John Middleton said.

A third FOSI member, Sheila Paul, was the only one in the room who seemed happy, later telling the News Leader Pictorial a huge burden had been lifted from her shoulders.

"I can tell my husband I don't have to move off of Vancouver Island, she said.

Tennant said he was proud of the lack of acrimony that accompanied this edition of Bamberton, particularly when compared to the rancour that coloured the original proposal in the mid-'90s.

He said Three Point —a business partnership consisting of his, Julseth's and three other families — remains committed to the Bamberton site and doing something with it that will benefit the Mill Bay community.

"It was a labour of love when we got involved," he said. " I think we are fundamentally committed to the community, and fundamentally and financially committed to that property."

Despite regret over the outcome, Mill Bay-Malahat Director Brian Harrison said the CVRD was right to demand more.

"To me, the potential of Bamberton was one that would have been a benefit to this community," he said.

"However, our prime responsibility is to protect our community.

"There's no question the community was going to be dramatically impacted. I think it's a good project, but the pieces are not there to make it work at this time"

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