

## Latest Bamberton developer promises to go slow

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Twelve years ago, I was laid off from a job at South Island Development Corp., where I worked on the infamous Bamberton project.

On behalf of the Canadian pension funds that owned the Bamberton lands, South Island -- led by developer David Butterfield -- had proposed to build an environmentally sustainable, planned community on the site of an old cement plant, which shut down in 1980 after 68 years of operation.

The site in question, with almost 5 1/2 kilometres of prime waterfront, is located on the western shores of the Saanich Inlet, 32 kilometres north of Victoria.

Under South Island's proposal, the 1,560-acre site was to become home to 12,000 residents over a 20-year period.

Half the site was to be preserved as parkland and natural habitat; traffic calming measures would discourage driving and encourage walking; and a number of ecologically sustainable features, including a tertiary sewage treatment facility, were on the boards.

Environmentalists, business people and urban planners hailed the proposal as visionary, the way of the future. Others condemned it as too big, too ugly, too much community for the sensitive Saanich Inlet.

Bamberton divided the community. Neighbours and families were split, pro and con. Public hearings turned violent. Vandalism reared its ugly head.

On paper, I believed in Bamberton. But after working on the site for many months, watching the seals frolicking and eagles soaring over the sloped shoreline, I started to question whether this was the right thing for this land.

In the end, the Cowichan Valley Regional District directors turned down the proposal at fourth reading of the rezoning application. (Usually, after first, second and third readings have passed, fourth reading is a mere formality.

In this case, opponents turned up the heat, and the application stalled.) At that point, most of the South Island staff -- including me -- was laid off. By then, the constant conflict had worn me down and, because I questioned my commitment to the project, anyway, I was ready to move on.

I ended up back in the media; South Island stuck it out with Bamberton, in vain, until 1996; and the whole commotion moved to the back burner.

But Bamberton is still a sore point in the Cowichan Valley. So, I was surprised to hear that another developer had purchased most of the land -- still zoned for heavy industry and forestry -- and is proposing to develop a community on the same site.

The new owner, Victoria's Three Point Properties, bought the land in March, from the pension fund-holders who have owned it since the South Island days.

Last week, I visited Bamberton for the first time in 12 years, to meet one of the new owners, Ross Tennant. I wanted to know why he thought his company could succeed where the previous proponents had failed.

"One of the issues in the past was that the developers came in with preconceived notions of what they were going to do there," said Tennant. "We're going to take our time, look at the issues and come up with a proposal."

One of the first things Tennant and his colleagues did upon acquiring the land was to review all past documentation to understand where the earlier proposal had gone wrong.

They identified four main areas of concern - density, visual impact, highway congestion and whether the science supported the development, in terms of sewage treatment and water sources.

With those matters in mind, Three Point intends to consult with the community before any development plans are drawn up. The goal is to have a working proposal to present to the community early in 2006.

All Tennant can say now is he expects the proposal will include a commercial town centre, a combination of single and multi-family residential units and maybe a marina.

He wouldn't reveal the purchase price of the land in question but he did say it was such that that Three Point can afford to create a less dense community than the one proposed by South Island Development all those years ago.

Meanwhile, the company has 26 workers onsite "deconstructing" the old cement plant, disposing of kiln dust and asbestos and recycling all the steel and concrete they dig up.

These early efforts appear to have generated some goodwill in the community, said Tennant, adding that he and his colleagues also have the changing times on their side.

"There is a recognition now that something should happen on the site, rather than just leaving it sitting here," he said. "The community wants to develop a tax base but there's another part of the community that wants parks and greenspace, and it's about finding the balance."

He believes his company can do that.

All being well, development could begin as early as fall of 2007. "I'm really optimistic," said Tennant. "The stuff we're hearing about the approach we're taking is affirming. I think we have the opportunity to do something really exciting here."

So did the previous developer.

Whether Tennant and Three Point Properties succeeds or meets the same fate as South Island is yet to be seen.

One thing is certain, though - the community will be watching.

### **[Illustration]**

Colour Photo: Ross Tennant of Three Point Properties at the old cement plant on the Bamberton site. "We're going to take our time, look at the issues and come up with a proposal."