

March 14, 2025

Dear Mayor & Council,

Re: Ambleside Commercial Area Local Area Plan

The Ambleside Commercial Area LAP fails to envision or demonstrate how future development will fit in or enhance the charming, small seaside village character that so many cherish.

The LAP fails to recognize that, decade after decade, residents have insisted on keeping Ambleside low rise. (Think of the public backlash to Grosvenor and to oversize development proposals for the Masonic Hall and Fresh Street sites. Consider public opposition to 4-storey buildings during the drafting of the Ambleside Town Centre Strategy or the support for the small village examples in ADBIA's *Imagine Ambleside* report).

By and large, this sentiment has not changed. **People do not want height on or near our waterfront. They want modest buildings that preserve views and access to sunlight. And they want our small, independent shops and services to succeed.**

At the January 13th Council meeting, Councillor Watt specifically asked what the **unintended negative impacts upzoning and densification may have on existing businesses**. Councillor Watt gave an example of a property being rezoned from 1.75 FAR to 3.0, and asked if rents would go up as property assessments increased.

Planning staff deflected this important question but it's critical that citizens and Council recognize there *are* negative consequences. Property owners will realize a net gain from upzoning, but it will be more expensive for small businesses. Property taxes are based on *potential* value. A lot zoned to allow up to 6-storeys will be taxed based on a 6-storey building even if it only has a one-storey building. Higher property taxes will be passed down to business operators through rent increases. Up-zoning puts undue pressure on small independent businesses who site unaffordable lease rates as a primary obstacle.

By dodging Councillor Watt's straight-forward question, Planning has done a disservice to Council and citizens who need to fully understand these impacts.

The density proposed in this LAP will bring change, but it is irrevocable, neighbourhood-altering and unnecessary. It favours developers and caters to high-end chains who can afford glitzy, "generous-ceilinged" spaces and expensive leases. This is a very different direction and contrary to residents' repeatedly stated preference for small village character, independent shops and access to sunlight and views.

The City of Vancouver made a point of protecting "Mom & Pop" local retail in three areas (Davie, Denman and Robson Streets) by restricting zoning to commercial only.

They purposely removed the pressure/temptation to add residential (which inflates property values) and were very clear that these areas are strictly for business. They also focused on adding elements that make little shopping streets thrive, such as patios, street trees, lighting and wider sidewalks. And they **capped building heights to make sure that the sun can get in** (another factor that makes people linger on shopping streets).

Planning staff are leaning heavily on the LAP survey as evidence of public endorsement of the plan. Yet only about half of the mere 400-odd respondents indicated “support”, and **we don’t even know how many of these are WV residents**. Such lack-lustre numbers may be attributed to the fact that many residents have simply given up. (Not surprising when more than 1,600 *verified* WV residents told Council they did NOT want more than 4-storeys on the Grosvenor site to no avail).

I disagree with the argument that it’s not financially feasible to redevelop without a huge increase in density. Many places (e.g. Carmel, Edgemont Village, Steveston, Oak Bay) have managed to thrive while maintaining their small village character. By not deferring to economic rationalism these places have retained the qualities that make them distinctive and special.

However, lack of certainty is an impediment to revitalization. Property owners are reluctant to make upgrades or sign long-term leases while they wait to see what is in store. And business owners will not invest in improvements when their lease might be terminated at any moment. If Council puts their foot down and insists on low-rise development, owners and business operators could get on with making the most of their properties.

There is enormous pressure to move forward no matter how badly this plan has failed to address the community’s priorities. This tendency to accept unsatisfactory results, often with the rationale that, while not perfect, we can work with it, is problematic. It’s how we ended up with an OCP calling for 1,000-1,200 new housing units in Ambleside. These numbers never should have been included in such a high-level document. But instead of insisting they be removed, we just moved on, not wanting to hold up the process. Now we have an LAP driven by accommodating an arbitrary number of new housing units at the expense of the **charm and character** of our village – **elements called for in almost every study of Ambleside’s commercial area for the last 20 years!**

Sincerely,

Melinda Slater
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Please do not redact.