

Disillusioned by municipal process

Slater, Melinda

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Dear Editor: Martin Millerchip's column (Big Development Drives Big Change) in the North Shore News Jan. 5 struck a chord. I also thought municipal politics was kind of a "last frontier" as far as individuals having an ability to influence and affect change. Having spoken with most members of the District of West Vancouver council, I genuinely like the politicians I have met, (even though I may not always agree with them) and believe they are decent, principled and hardworking. Regrettably, I also agree with Mr. Millerchip's observation that it is no longer possible for residents to shape their community when it comes to the big decisions; particularly if their ideas do not line up with those of developers.

I have closely followed the process that approved Grosvenor's development application for the 1300-block Marine Drive. Of interest is that early on many residents predicted the fate of the 1300-block was essentially a done deal and there was nothing they could do about it. I was skeptical myself but nonetheless felt it was imperative to follow the process closely, make an educated decision and ensure my opinion was heard. What spurred me along was the notion that a majority of residents were of similar opinion regarding the density proposed for this site. The Ambleside Dundarave Ratepayers Association's petition, which collected over 1,600 signatures requesting a smaller scale development, supported this concept. But how naive I was to think our politicians (with the notable exceptions of councillors Cameron and Gambioli) would respect the wishes of the majority of taxpayers who took the time to weigh in on this matter.

What was the point of an exhaustive (and expensive) public consultation process if council ultimately decides to ignore the feedback? It's really just a public relations move to let residents think they have a say when in fact the only aspects the public was encouraged to influence were whether they'd prefer a massive increase in density in a concave or convex form, and how about some art with that? It was apparent from the get-go that there was never any appetite to address fundamental matters of height and density.

Our elected officials have let a developer determine the fate of Ambleside Village against the wishes of a significant number of residents. Perhaps dazzled by financial gain, there was no hope for a balanced solution that could have seen a modest increase in tax and density which would have satisfied almost everyone.

To accept any development proposal without first determining what the community will support puts the cart before the horse and the developer in the driver's seat. After witnessing other major flaws, including the absence of an open bidding process, one can't help but be left with the impression the District of West Vancouver is seriously incompetent or (more likely) that it was working with a specific agenda.

I am disheartened and disillusioned. Not because we didn't "win," but because the process through which the decision was made is so inherently flawed and even though I did my best to do something about it, I could not make a difference.

Thank you Mr. Millerchip for voicing what many of us have been feeling. That's exactly what a community newspaper should do.

Melinda Slater

West Vancouver

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MILLERCHIP: Big development drives big change

Martin Millerchip / North Shore News

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It has been 39 years since I visited North Vancouver for the first time.

The block where my friends then lived reminded this new immigrant of an English seaside town. Partly it was the peekaboo view of Burrard Inlet. Mostly it was the use of wood rather than brick or stone as the building medium, the large setbacks on rectangular lots and the predominance of white as the colour of choice for both siding and picket fences.

The house is no longer there; long since replaced with another vinyl-sided beige monster whose garage sits atop what used to be a garden that fed a family of four in the summer. It looks energy efficient and much like many of its neighbours. It no longer reminds me of anywhere else except North Vancouver.

In 1979, I came back to North Vancouver to buy my first house. Seduced by the smell of the pines on Capilano Road near the Cleveland Dam and the bargain basement price of what was little more than a cabin in the woods, I became a homeowner without much thought - and subsequently a landlord once the reality of a monthly mortgage payment kicked in. In the North-

Vancouver-is-a-smallworld category, my tenants were first Bill MacDonald - who went on to co-found the Artists for Kids Trust - and then Terry Peters, whose love of photography would eventually get him a job at the North Shore News where he has been my boss since the departure of Tim Renshaw.

A few years later, I sold the property with a single classified ad in, of course, the News. A builder bought it for the list price and immediately levelled the lot. The vinyl-sided house that replaced my cabin offered four times the floor space, but the mature trees that shielded the house from Capilano Road were felled in the process.

Change, as Heraclitus said, is the only constant in life.

I have been thinking a lot about change this past week as I retire as editor of this paper.

My connection to the News began by chance in 1986. My journalist partner, Catherine, was one of the News' council reporters at the time. She had the flu, phoned in sick and was told to either find a replacement herself or attend the council meeting, sick or not. She asked me and, faced with a choice of staying home and likely cleaning up vomit or earning a few dollars from reporting a council meeting, I took the money. All three stories I filed were published - even the one about a local proclamation that should have been spiked.

When Catherine left the uncertain world of freelance journalism to return to a guaranteed monthly salary in the field of insurance, I took over her assignments. I covered District of North Vancouver council meetings for 10 years until I became a full-time employee of the News in 1997 - and for four more years after that because I wanted to stay in close touch with the municipal politics I found fascinating.

I still do. But I am also beginning to despair of the interplay between politicians, money and staff.

I imply no evil with that statement. Almost all of the politicians I have met are decent, principled and hard-working. I would categorize only a handful as lazy or indifferent, and I have never been presented with evidence that any of them voted anything but their conscience. But when I used to write editorials urging residents to vote or get involved in official community plan shaping, I would argue that the municipal arena was one where change could be effected. I don't know if that is still true - at least when it comes to the big decisions. Twenty years ago, no North Shore council would have ignored an opposition petition of approximately 1,400 residents, as happened

recently in West Vancouver. But the first rule of politics is: get re-elected. And to avoid big tax increases to pay for degrading infrastructure, the big revenues from big development drive big changes - whether we want them or not. I was horrified when I heard of open houses that purported to let residents shape the future but then didn't allow the removal of blocks that signified density, only their rearrangement.

It makes absolutely no sense to me that the two municipalities of North Vancouver continue to plan in splendid isolation from one another. The district's OCP plans increased density in Lynn Valley, Lower Capilano and Lynnmour - essentially encircling the city. There is nothing wrong with that concept as far as creating what passes for affordability and perhaps attracting a younger demographic - if the district was a magical entity unto itself. But it isn't, and meanwhile the city is chasing the same younger demographic in spades. If the city's draft OCP is adopted, there won't be any single-family zoning in the municipality. Logically, joint city-district planning might have endorsed the same concept, but would the district density targets have remained the same? And would a major development on the waterfront with only one access point - as is being planned by Concert Properties - be allowed to proceed without a Marine Drive corridor transportation plan in place for all of North Vancouver? Individually and in groups, North Vancouver residents are asking these questions. But these days it seems that developers and planners have louder voices at town hall; that our politicians are no longer there to control change but to manage how we adapt to them. Perhaps, when Marine Drive, Capilano Road, Keith Road, Main Street and Mountain Highway are at a standstill for more of the day than they are already, a tipping point in the amalgamation debate will be reached.

I hope it won't be too late to protect some of what I first loved about the North Shore.

One thing that I know will remain constant is this newspaper. There have been big changes at the North Shore News since my first association with it in 1986. Back then, we typeset our pages through a wax printer before physically couriering the pages to the presses. Now, it's all done with the keyboard's "Send" button.

The North Shore News is no longer an independent newspaper, having passed through several ownership changes since Peter Speck sold the paper he built from the North Shore Shopper. Staffing levels have changed as a global economy means some elements of our production can be outsourced. But it does not seem to matter who leaves and who stays. The paper retains its commitment to being the best that it can be with the resources at hand. Of course, I am biased. But our current editorial crew is as good a group of journalists as one could hope to work with.

They have carried me for the eight years I have been editor and I thank them all, past and present, for that - and for allowing me to eat sardines in the newsroom.

Finally, I want to thank you, the readers. You complete the circle and without you the News would not exist. I hope you will continue to read us, to talk to our excellent columnists, to comment online, to allow us to feature you in our stories and to hold us to account when we make mistakes. And to those who have ever picked up the phone to say thank you for whatever reason, know that it was you who always made this job worthwhile.