

Bellevue tower proposal toppled; Developer's plans for a 20-unit condo project at Masonic Hall site sent back to drawing board

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A midrise development was toppled in West Vancouver council chambers Monday - despite the objections of the mayor.

The pitch for an eight-storey residential tower on the north side of Bellevue Avenue's 1700 block and 15 new parking spots for the public was sent back to the drawing board after councillors objected to both the building's height and the project's failure to provide adequate community benefit.

The development should have been able to at least proceed to public hearing, according to Mayor Michael Smith.

"A lot of people think that the community can stay the way it was in 1970 when they moved here. It can't," Smith said. "We're going to lose our commercial district unless we do something."

That something is adding density, according to the mayor, who noted the recent closure of Blue Eyed Marys restaurant.

"You wonder whether or not (the restaurant) would've been able to make it if we made these 20 units built and occupied by people that could walk out the door and go to Ambleside."

The defeated project, which would have replaced the two-storey, 1950s era Masonic Hall, was slated to include 20 residential units averaging 1,665 square feet, as well as 2,900 square feet of ground floor commercial space.

However, giving the project a green light would have meant changing the site's community use zoning, which did not sit well with Coun. Christine Cassidy.

"John Lawson donated this land, and he donated it for community use," she said.

"You can build an apartment building anywhere you want in West Vancouver. You cannot get community use anywhere in West Vancouver."

Had the project been approved, the district would have received a community amenity contribution of \$1.605 million, as well as parking spots worth approximately \$375,000.

"In the scheme of things that's nothing," Cassidy said.

Cassidy's comments appeared to rankle Coun. Mary-Ann Booth, who supported sending the project to public hearing.

"That's all I hear is: 'Don't close any parking spots,' and now parking is not a valued amenity?" she asked.

Council eventually sent the developer, Newport Development Corp., back to the drawing board with a request to include space for a community group, like a youth centre, in the project.

"The Ambleside Youth Centre is basically falling down," noted Coun. Craig Cameron. "Where are those tens of millions of dollars going to come from?" If the project incorporates a room or two for community use, the community will pay for it in lost community amenity contributions, Booth responded.

"It's not free, it's not being given to us," she said.

While Booth allowed nothing would warm her heart more than a new youth centre, council doesn't have a plan or even know if young people would be comfortable on Bellevue Avenue, she said.

If necessary, the district could pay market value for space in the project, according to Cameron.

"I guarantee you we won't be selling it for less than we bought it," he said.

Stretching up 82 feet - more than three storeys taller than the district allows - the project would have required council to amend the official community plan, something that did not sit well with Coun. Bill Soprovich, who voted against moving the project forward.

While the building's height is out of step with the OCP, district staff noted the project does support the OCP's aim of spurring economic development in Ambleside.

"Its location will encourage residents to use local businesses," agreed resident Michelle Vaughan, who also touted the project's organic roof and ground level gardens.

"It increases property tax revenues, it creates six new commercial spaces, which create business and increase commercial tax revenues," she said.

The project also adds 20 units to a community "desperately" in need of greater housing choices, Vaughan said.

"If we don't do something now I can't imagine what's going to become of Ambleside in the next 10 years," she said. "The tax burden on residents is going to be monumental and we're going to lose businesses."

Cassidy disagreed.

"We can't even fill the commercial space that we have. You drive along Marine Drive and the favourite sign now in the windows is For Lease. So, we need more competition? I think not."

While she wasn't opposed to developing the site, council watcher **Melinda Slater** said the community "can do a whole lot better."

"Even I can see far more potential in this site than what's on offer: a few lousy parking spots and some cash in our pocket," she said.

Slater was one of several residents who asked council to withhold approval until staff conclude their review of the OCP.

"Why in heaven's name would we not wait for a community endorsed plan for Ambleside?" she asked.

Council shouldn't drag its feet too long, warned resident Gordon Holly.

"I think we've got to be careful about turning the screws to developers. At some point they just go, 'You know what, West Van's not the place we want to develop,'" he said.

Credit: Jeremy Shepherd; North Shore News

Illustration

Photo Supplied / Coun. Mary-Ann Booth supported sending the project to public hearing.

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