

COWICHAN VALLEY CITIZEN

West Vista Terrace project gets green light from North Cowichan



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The West Vista Terrace development project, located near the new Cowichan District Hospital, has been allowed to proceed in a 4-2 vote by North Cowichan's council. | Citizen file photo

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North Cowichan council decided to allow the controversial West Vista Terrace project to move forward in 4-2 vote at its meeting on Nov. 20.

The development project, which will be located on 31 acres of land near the new Cowichan District Hospital, includes the construction of 700 residential units, retail and commercial spaces and a 95-room hotel.

The West Vista Terrace project, which is being proposed by Mill Bay-based West Vista development company, was turned down by North Cowichan's council in a 3-3 vote in March, but the company resubmitted its application to the municipality and Coun. Chris Istace changed his vote on the issue at the meeting on Nov. 20, allowing the project to proceed.

Staff will now draft an amendment to North Cowichan's Official Community Plan to permit the project that will be considered by council at a future meeting.

Istace pointed out to the packed council chambers, which saw numerous speakers talk on both sides of the issue earlier in the meeting on Nov. 20, that since the March meeting, he and other council members have attended numerous gatherings with other municipal and provincial leaders from across B.C. in which the need for more housing was discussed at length.

He also said that since March, B.C. municipalities have seen Bill 44, which requires local governments to update their zoning bylaws to allow for more housing units, come into effect, and the federal government has initiated the housing accelerator fund and assured local governments they will receive millions of dollars if they take bold action to increase their housing inventories.

"We were denied funding from the housing accelerator fund, and we're trying again so maybe now is the time for bold action." Istace said. "I voted against this project last time but I very clearly said in that vote that I like the Bell McKinnon local area plan, but I wasn't convinced at the time of the urban-containment boundary and I said I was concerned about infrastructure. I've asked a lot of questions on the phasing in of the local area plan since then and I realized those infrastructure triggers are now in place [due to other developments nearby]."

Istace also added that since March, the municipality has changed its development cost charges and community contribution policies, which will see significant money come into North Cowichan from developers, which will reduce the financial impacts of development on taxpayers.

"I think we're in a good area to move forward safely with [development] in that area north of Herd Road," he said.

Coun. Christopher Justice, who voted against the West Vista Terrace project proceeding along with Mayor Rob Douglas, said he doesn't think changing the official community plan and the urban-containment boundary is in the long-term best interests of the community.

He said the vision of North Cowichan residents for the future development of their community has been captured in the OCP through the expertise of North Cowichan's planning staff after a long public consultation process, and that's how communities should be planned.

"Our staff is telling us this project will not achieve the goal of speeding up housing construction, but it will be very disruptive and may actually have the converse effect," Justice said.

"In my six years on council, I've never seen a staff report so vehement and thorough in warning us about what a poor idea moving forward with this would be."

Coun. Tek Manhas said the West Vista Terrace project proposal had been in process in North Cowichan for two years before the land was taken out of the urban-containment boundary as the municipality updated its OCP, and the municipality changed the rules for the developer midstream.

"What are other people going to think about that, especially considering the province is spending more than \$1.6 billion on the hospital?" he asked. "The water and sewer is there at their doorsteps now and ready to be hooked up."

Coun. Mike Caljouw said he thinks it was a mistake to take West Vista out of the UCB in the first place.

"It's literally across the road from the hospital," he said. "That seems to me to be the biggest tragedy in the whole process here."

Coun. Bruce Findlay said he has been in favour of the project since it was first presented to council.

"I'm in favour because it's the right thing to do," he said. "It's within metres of the hospital site and that is one of the most critical things that I'm hanging my hat on. The OCP is a living document and not gospel. We need to look at everything that comes before us that makes sense, and this makes sense."

Douglas said there is more than enough land designated within the urban containment boundary to accommodate North Cowichan's future housing needs for some time, and

there is significant development activity already underway across the municipality, so expanding the boundary is not warranted

“But North Cowichan does face significant housing needs over the next five to 20 years and few would question that,” he said. “However, I’m concerned that some of these housing figures are being weaponized as a way to undermine our OCP and UCB.”