

Sooke contemplates putting high density in its future

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The District of Sooke is unveiling a wide-ranging bylaw intended to infuse the urban feel of taller, more compact buildings, into an area best-known for its quiet country life.

The proposed changes come from a new zoning bylaw, the first of its kind for Sooke. The district inherited its current zoning rules from the Capital Regional District after it was incorporated in 1999.

"We've had this ancient zoning bylaw for six years and it has been very difficult to work with because it's very old and it's been amended many times," said Cheryl Wirsz, a planner from the development services department. "It's an unwieldy beast that didn't meet our needs."

The proposed bylaw touches on almost everything in Sooke's newly sewerred town core, from property sizes, to building heights, parking requirements, ocean views, harbour zoning and even the height of backyard sheds.

A public hearing is scheduled for 7:30 p.m., today at the SEAPARC facility, 2168 Phillips Road.

Sooke's \$22.6-million sewer system and treatment plant -- built and operated by Alberta-based utility company EPCOR -- has been the driving force behind the proposed changes, said Wirsz.

The system was finished in January and about 1,700 homes must connect to the sewer by the end of the year.

Previously, Sooke had required large setback areas on property to make room for septic fields, said Wirsz. This kept property owners from being able to easily subdivide into smaller, single-family lots, she said.

"It was not a wise use of land," said Wirsz. People have been waiting for some time to be able to subdivide, she said.

The space freed up by the sewer could allow Sooke to have smaller setback and site coverage requirements and put buildings closer to property lines, said Wirsz.

For residents it could mean more houses on smaller properties. For example, a single-family parcel dwelling could be subdivided as small as 600 square metres instead of the current 1,300 square metres, said Wirsz.

As well, "accessory" structures such as garages could grow as high as two storeys and house legal tenants under the bylaw.

But Sooke Coun. Jen Smith said, for such wide-sweeping changes, "there's absolutely zero awareness from the people I talk to that it will affect them."

"It's a bylaw designed by developers, for developers," she said.

It could make for scenarios where taller houses have not only secondary suites, but tenants living in garages closer to property lines and disrupting a previously quiet neighbourhood, said Smith.

More smart growth planning is needed, and such major changes should be discussed as part of the Official Community Plan review expected next year, she said.

"It seems to me we're approaching this all wrong," said Smith, the former president of the Sooke Area Ratepayers Association.

Sooke Mayor Janet Evans said promoting taller, closer, buildings in the town core will take development pressures off Sooke's rural areas.

"My vision of urban is downtown Victoria and that's not a vision we have for Sooke," she said. "But we do need to use our land for the best."

"My vision has always been to encourage development and businesses in the core in order to help sustain our community. No community can survive with storefronts all boarded up and nobody in them."

Written feedback has been split on the bylaw, said Wirsz.

Some have complained that it allows for an increase in the height of commercial buildings, from three to six storeys, which could potentially block water views for some non-waterfront houses.

The bylaw proposes "view corridors" be preserved in the future, a technique used in cities such as Vancouver.

A district committee has been working on the proposed bylaw since February. The next step is a public hearing where residents can make suggestions and lobby for changes.

"If the community speaks, we will listen," said Wirsz.