

Huge Oakridge overhaul eyed

Midtown mall redevelopment would create new Vancouver commercial, residential neighbourhood

Peter Mitham

Vancouver's landmark Oakridge Centre shopping mall will become a high-density mixed-use neighbourhood under an ambitious plan presented to Vancouver city council on March 15.

Under development since 2004, the draft policy statement for the site recommends boosting retail space at the mall to 950,000 square feet from 619,000 square feet, increasing office space to 326,000 square feet from 126,000 square feet and adding 1.2 million square feet of residential in two main clusters of towers that will vary in height but max out at upwards of 250 feet.

City staff expect Ivanhoe Cambridge, the centre's owner, to submit a rezoning application for the 28-acre site at Cambie and 41st later this year.

Gordon Wylie, development director, Western Canada for Ivanhoe Cambridge, said the pending redevelopment aims to help Oakridge, the largest mall in Vancouver outside downtown, stay competitive.

Originally built in 1956 and expanded in 1984, Oakridge is one of the top-ranked shopping centres west of Toronto on the basis of sales per square foot.

Though the Oakridge site was successfully rezoned in 1991 to allow an additional 125,000 square feet of development, Wylie said the current plan is more ambitious because it will become a transit hub when the Canada Line rapid transit link enters service in 2009.

In addition to expanding existing uses, Ivanhoe Cambridge plans to add new components such as community amenities, parks and street-front retail both along Cambie Street and a high-street area through the centre of the site that will be a focus for the local community.

"The new retail street is a strong ingredient of the overall project," Wylie said.

Concert Properties Ltd. was consulted regarding plans for the residential component of the site.

Once rezoning begins, Wiley expects redevelopment to start in 2011 and run through 2018.

Ivanhoe Cambridge, which spent \$80 million integrating Burnaby's Metrotown Centre into the Metropolis complex in 2005 and is planning a \$250 million redevelopment of Surrey's Guildford Town Centre, has planned to redevelop Oakridge since 2002.

However, the scale of the current project is larger than the other projects. As Wylie told councillors on March 15:

"Traditionally, malls don't do this."

Construction of the Canada Line between Vancouver and Richmond provided impetus, however.

"It would have been difficult for the city to look at high-intensity uses without the Canada Line," Wylie said.

Indeed, Vancouver city planning director Brent Toderian believes transit is key to the project. When the Canada Line begins service in 2009, city staff forecast that transit ridership past the site will double. This creates opportunities the current mall won't be able to capture.

"It's perhaps the greatest opportunity for densification in the city outside the downtown because of its central location and its strong relationship to intensive public transit," Toderian said.

The mall's overhaul will also launch redevelopment opportunities for the entire neighbourhood, Toderian said, noting that a development plan for the surrounding area is set to come to council later this year.

But he said the intent is not to remake Oakridge in the image of Metrotown, something that many area residents have spoken out against. The Oakridge policy statement instead calls for a walkable environment for Oakridge, something Toderian considers key to making the public realm livable and not overbearing.

"The art is how to do density in a way that still seems comfortable and walkable, but is in fact high-density," he said.

Maintaining the balance is key as both the city and the province adopt and encourage green development policies.

While the city's policy statement on Oakridge encourages a mix of transit-oriented uses as well as mandating that 20% of new residential development on the site meet affordable housing requirements, the province's recent TransLink review indicates that densification of transit properties will be key to funding future rapid transit developments.

For Michael Grant, chairman of the strata council at the Terraces on Cambie, which is the only residential component in the existing development, Ivanhoe Cambridge's plans are much-needed.

"It is in the old-style mall construction: lots of walls facing out and everything else facing in," Grant said.

A redeveloped Oakridge promises to bring more people to the neighbourhood, creating vibrancy where there are now parking lots (parking in the new mall will be underground). Street-front shops will also add life, Grant said.