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City teams with developers to transform Downtown South

Southern part of downtown peninsula has more than a dozen projects in various stages of completion

Glen Korstrom

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Vancouver's fast-growing Downtown South is being primed for an extreme urban makeover.

City planners expect the 14,000-resident district, which is squeezed between the West End, Yaletown and Robson Street, to be home to another 10,000 people by 2021.

By then, the City of Vancouver will have pumped an estimated \$81.1 million into the area for improvements such as two 49-space child-care facilities, subsidized housing and more park space, according to a plan that Vancouver council passed May 3. The money for the amenities will come primarily from increased development cost charges.

"There will be some pedestrian and public transit improvements for the area and most notably the completion of the Helmcken-Comox greenway," said city planner David Ramslie.

That greenway will include a two-way bike lane and more space for pedestrians along the neighbourhood's Helmcken Street leading up to St. Paul's Hospital on Burrard Street.

Part of the roughly \$25.4 million that the city plans to spend on parks in the neighbourhood will be earmarked for the greenway, Ramslie said.

The rest will be spent to buy land to create what Ramslie calls "small pocket parks" of approximately 10,000 square feet each and to expand Davie Street's Emery Barnes Park.

Area development sites include the high-traffic corner of Howe and Davie streets. Imperial Oil Company tore up its street-level, revenue-generating parking lot in 1996 and left it as a pit for more than a decade.

Now comes word that new owner Vancouver-based Anthem Properties plans to build a 14-storey, 112-unit residential tower on the site, which is one of more than a dozen projects in the Downtown South neighbourhood.

By 2021, Seymour Street's 372-suite Capitol Residences are slated to be long established on land known as the Capitol 6 site. Similarly, the two-building Symphony Place will be nearing teenaged status across the street. So will Hornby Street's 73-suite Pure development. Perhaps even the long-delayed Umberto Menghi dream of a 16-storey boutique hotel where part of the restaurateur's Il Giardino now stands will be complete.

Aside from funds allocated for greenway and pocket park initiatives, two other key areas will absorb much of what's left of the city's new-found Downtown South budget:

- subsidized housing; and
- child-care spaces.

The largest slice of the new money, roughly \$39.8 million, is earmarked for subsidized housing, Ramslie said.

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That could mean that the city will buy existing low-cost housing hotels. It might add vacant sites to its portfolio. It could also partner with developers and give incentives for private enterprise to build new space.

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Child care will likely consume \$9.8 million and could include agreements with developers to include day-care spaces in their building in exchange for bonus density.

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The result would be a good fit for a developer planning a family-friendly facility.

Anthem's project at Howe and Davie streets will have a children's play area on its seventh floor, but will not be marketed specifically to couples with children, said Anthem's vice-president of administration, Sylvia Yung.

The 1205 Howe Street building will have street front retail on Davie Street that will wrap partly onto Howe Street.

The project, which passed the city's design panel stage in early May in its second attempt, is in the queue to potentially get city development approval by the end of the year.

Neither Imperial Oil nor Anthem would reveal what Anthem paid for the site in late 2006.

But Imperial Oil spokesman Pius Rolheiser said from Calgary that leaving the site as a pit was part of a premeditated strategy for what, until 1989, was a Texaco gas station.

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"A parking lot is not the maximum use for the site," Rolheiser said.

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"The decision was made at some point to remediate the hydrocarbon impacted soils on the site to a standard that would enable it to be redeveloped for commercial land use."

Imperial Oil's two-pronged strategy was to remove on-site contaminated soil and then suck hydrocarbon vapours through drill holes from dirt under surrounding roads.

"It took so long, because vapour extraction is a gradual process. It takes a period of years," Rolheiser said.

B.C.'s Environment Ministry granted Imperial one soil compliance certificate in 2004 for on-site work and another in 2005 for its vapour recovery work of nearby roads.

"More people will benefit from this whether it's commercial or whatever than if it is just simply a parking lot," Rolheiser said. u

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