

Riverview revamp grows in scope

Proposal calls for towers ringing new and old psychiatric facilities

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METRO VANCOUVER -- The B.C. government is planning a multibillion-dollar development with dozens of residential towers on the historic Riverview lands in Coquitlam, according to internal government documents obtained by *The Vancouver Sun*.

The resulting community - to be called the Coquitlam Commons -- would include everything from facilities for the mentally ill to high-end market housing.

The concept calls for the construction of more than a dozen residential towers of 20 storeys or higher on the eastern part of the 98-hectare site, which has been home to the Riverview psychiatric hospital for more than 100 years.

At least 25 more "mid-range" towers are included in the proposals, more than half of which would rise to 15 storeys or higher.

The plans include at least 10 additional condominium and apartment buildings.

Riverview psychiatric facilities, both existing and new ones, would be scattered in the centre of the property.

The plan could generate billions of dollars in real estate deals, with millions potentially flowing to the province.

The documents offer the first detailed glimpse of what the province is considering for the site.

The Sun reported last summer that a large development was being planned for the property, prompting the government to admit in July it was looking to trade land to private developers in return for a share of the profits to bolster



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social housing supplies.

At that time, the proposal called for as many as 7,000 residences to be built. Since then, the plan appears to have increased in scale, and Coquitlam councillors suggested 10,000 or more residential units could be in the works.

Housing Minister Rich Coleman downplayed the draft documents on Wednesday, insisting any development of the site is "a long ways down the road."

But he confirmed his office is planning to put a proposed site design out to tender to explore the "opportunities and options."

He said the public could get a chance to weigh in on the issue "over the new few months."

Right now, he said, "there is nothing designed for Riverview."

The fact that the government continues to plan for residential development at Riverview came as news to Coquitlam Mayor Maxine Wilson, whose council has been vocally opposed to any market development of the land.

The city is poised to give consideration to a resolution in support of maintaining Riverview as a haven for the mentally ill, as well as preserving its historic architecture and protecting one of the last major green spaces in the Vancouver region.

Wilson said Wednesday she expects to be supported by surrounding Metro municipalities.

"We all see it as the one place in the Lower Mainland that can house those with mental illness humanely, and allow for their reintegration into the community," she said.

Wilson said her council has no intention of granting any rezoning of the hospital lands to allow for residential development, and is banking on previous assurances from Coleman that the government will not override Coquitlam's wishes.

New Democrat MLA Diane Thorne (Coquitlam-Maillardville) said she has heard the same promises, but doesn't believe them.

"It's a done deal, that's what I'm afraid of," she said.

Thorne said her concerns about the future of Riverview grew more urgent earlier this month when the government resurrected interest in pursuing a southeastern route for the proposed Evergreen rapid-transit line, with projected annual ridership figures of 33.3 million by 2031.

Those ridership numbers could only be achieved through heavy development of Riverview, said Thorne.

Coquitlam council favours a northeastern route chosen earlier by TransLink for the proposed line. It has projected ridership figures of 31.8 million by 2031.

Councillors openly questioned the province's projections for the southeastern route at a meeting Monday.

"That's basically Riverview being developed," councillor Fin Donnelly said of the southeastern route.

Coun. Lou Sekora said it could only mean the development of 10,000 or more housing units at Riverview, adding "I wouldn't support that."

Thorne said her heart sank again when Tuesday's throne speech referred to plans to build a new facility to house mentally ill patients at the site of the former Willingdon youth detention centre in Burnaby.

She worried that could spell a future downsizing of psychiatric services at Riverview.

"There are just too many thing happening here," she said.

Health Minister George Abbott said the plans for Willingdon will add to the province's existing mental health services.

The proposed 100-bed facility will specifically serve those patients who suffer from both mental illness and drug and alcohol additions, and who tend to end up on the streets with few or no available options to receive the help they need.

"They are almost impossible to house in mental-health-supported beds, acting out in ways that are anti-social or violent," Abbott said.

Abbott said Riverview will continue to be used to treat patients with other mental-health needs. He also said new facilities will likely be constructed on the site.

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with a file from Coquitlam Now*

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