

Four new highrises proposed for False Creek, new BC Place roof credited with revitalisation

Buildings would add close to 900 condos to downtown; city would receive land worth \$13M for social housing

BY JEFF LEE, VANCOUVER SUN JANUARY 14, 2011



The new retractable roof at BC Place Stadium is being credited with an upsurge in development in the area, including proposals expected in the spring from Aquilini Investment Group and Canadian Metropolitan Properties.

Photograph by: Jason Payne, PNG

Vancouver is considering a proposal from Concord Pacific to build four new highrise towers at the north end of Cambie Bridge near BC Place that will add nearly 900 condominiums to the downtown.

In exchange, the developers are proposing to give the city two Hastings Street properties in the Downtown Eastside worth \$13 million for more social housing.

The plan would run counter to the city's long-standing commitment to designate 20 per cent of the housing along False Creek for low-income residents. But city staff say they're overstocked with unused social-housing sites in the False Creek area that are too costly to develop because of the high land prices, and that the Hastings Street properties are more useful.

The development proposal is part of a massive number of amendments city council is being asked to approve next week for the False Creek North Official Development Plan. Those changes include a proposal from the BC Pavilion Corp. (PavCo) for the largest casino in Western Canada and two hotel towers, all to be built around BC Place; a new district energy utility similar to one built in the Olympic Village neighbourhood; and social-inclusion agreements that would require area businesses to hire a certain number of low-income local residents and to buy locally.

The changes, if accepted, would create more than 2,000 jobs and energize a corner of the city's downtown that has for years lain fallow while developers concentrated elsewhere. Council is being asked to send them to public hearings, with construction to potentially start later this year.

Later this spring, two other developers with interests around the Plaza of Nations and Rogers Arena, Canadian Metropolitan Properties and Aquilini Investment Group, are expected to bring forward proposals that will significantly add more residential units.

All of that upsurge in development activity is being attributed to PavCo's decision to replace the stadium roof with a retractable one.

"It is much, much larger than the Woodward's project," Coun. Geoff Meggs said. "It is hard to recall a more significant set of decisions by council in recent history."

But Meggs said the city's inability to build a mix of affordable housing in False Creek is a problem.

Vancouver has a decades-old policy of requiring one-fifth of all housing in the area to be for low-income residents, but so far has only been able to develop six of 15 sites, for a total percentage built of just 13 per cent.

"I'm not comfortable with continually eroding the mix of housing in the Concord lands, but I am even more uncomfortable with the inability to generate any housing in the mid-range at all for the last number of years," Meggs said.

"We really have to have a debate in this city about whether we're going to allow a situation where the only available housing is out of reach for 80 per cent of the people who live here."

David McLellan, the city's general manager of community services, said Concord's offer, as part of its mandatory community-amenity-contributions component, would give the city two important undeveloped properties in the Downtown Eastside, one at 58 West Hastings, across from the Army and Navy store, and the other at 117 East Hastings, next to the Insite needle exchange clinic.

"By having these parcels turned over to the city without any encumbrances [mortgages], we have a lot more flexibility in advancing the [city's social-housing] agenda," he said.

"We already have an inventory of spaces available in [False Creek]. We still want to stay with an

approach of providing quantity, but we are [now going to get them] in a place where we think we can act on it more quickly.”

He said the two sites, which have space for a couple hundred units, could be used for mixed-use residential or fully subsidized housing.

A call to Concord Pacific for comment was not returned.

Anti-poverty and social-housing activists have long advocated for the city to buy the properties. But Wendy Pederson of the Carnegie Community Action Project said she would rather that Concord Pacific have given them to the city outright than use them as part of its False Creek community-contribution requirements.

“We think Concord can afford to give up a lot, because they have made millions of dollars in profit in this city,” she said. “They could give those properties to the city. The city shouldn’t have to take a hit in other parts of the city in terms of losing the opportunity for social housing.”

Like McLellan, Pederson dismissed the suggestion that using the Hastings Street sites for social housing would perpetuate the ghettoization of the area.

“We hear this argument posed from outside often. We do need social housing in other parts of the city, but we need extra in the Downtown Eastside because this is an existing community,” she said. “There are more than 10,000 people under the low-income cutoff line living in some of the worst housing in Canada.”

The four Concord Pacific towers would be split between the west and east sides of the Cambie bridgehead. The towers to the east would be 19 and 20 storeys, and 28 and 30 storeys to the west. Under a complicated set of land-use swaps, PavCo, a Crown corporation, sold Concord its residential floor space for the west end of BC Place, allowing PavCo more commercial space for its casino, hotel towers and entertainment theatre. Concord and other developers in the area have to provide the city with \$19 million in community-amenity contributions meant for parks, social housing and other city initiatives.

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