

REGIONAL ROUNDUP Squamish takes full advantage of its pivotal position on the road to the 2010 Winter Olympics

Heart of the Sea to Sky

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Larry Murray trudges down a slippery, rain-soaked path to the tip of a peninsula of bare and muddy land in a part of downtown Squamish few local residents have ever set foot on and most visitors don't know exists.

Bordered on three sides by Howe Sound waters and directly across from the looming 700-metre Stawamus Chief granite cliff-face, the spit of land was once a chemical plant and railyard.

But now it's a blank canvas for visionaries of a town eager to swap its blue-collar image for that of an adventure-tourism mecca, with vibrant education and alternative energy sectors on the side.

The property, however, has a long way to go to achieve those aspirations.

It's desolate. Remediation stakes dot the barren landscape and dilapidated buildings from an abandoned mill site can be seen in the distance.

But Murray, head Squamish visionary, ignores the incessant drizzle and whipping winds to paint a picture of how this barren 32 hectares could look in five years if the residents and town council get their way.

Waterfront retail

Low-rise condo buildings would run down the centre of the peninsula, with artist shops, funky restaurants and pubs on the street level.

A boardwalk would surround the peninsula, pedestrian bridges would connect it to the rest of town and waterfront shops would bustle with visitors eager to rent kayaks, canoes, windsurfing and kite boards.

The small yacht club would be expanded, there would be a new municipal and private marina, and at the tip of the peninsula would be a dock for a new passenger ferry shuttling visitors and residents commuting to Vancouver.

Across from the ferry landing would sit a cruise ship terminal to handle passengers arriving as part of the West Coast's increasingly popular four-day "pocket" cruise ship circuit.

A five-star hotel and conference centre would anchor the site, and the facility would teem with young and upwardly mobile workers from the booming tourism and hospitality business.

It would be a good fit if Squamish delivers on plans to become ground zero for the province's expanded tourism training efforts.

As part of the plan, **Capilano College** would build a campus the size of its North Vancouver facility in downtown Squamish, with classrooms tucked in among the shops, bistros and light-industrial businesses on the redeveloped oceanfront.

Forest town retooled

Squamish — a forest industry town known largely as a pit stop on the way to Whistler or a bedroom community of Vancouver — is dreaming big.

"This little town is rocking and rolling," said Murray, a retired educator and former school district administrator in Trinidad and Tobago.

For decades Squamish has been a logging town, but the downturn in the coastal forest industry killed hundreds of jobs and sapped millions from the local economy.

A "perfect storm" of factors conspired to convince town leaders they could transform the barren oceanfront peninsula into a Granville Island-type zone, swarming with visitors, locals and students.

First, a slate of new councillors up for the job wiped out the "old guard" and assumed District of Squamish leadership a few years ago. Shortly thereafter, three key pieces of oceanfront land became available. **International Forest Products Ltd.**, which closed its mill in Squamish, recently put its waterfront land on the market.

The town is also in the final stages of negotiating ownership of oceanfront properties owned by **BC Rail Ltd.**, which was recently sold to **CN Rail Co.**, and former chemical manufacturer **Nexen Inc.**

As a bonus, and thanks to pressure from one of the company's major shareholders, the **Ontario Teachers Pension Plan**, Nexen spent \$45 million to remediate the site upon which it used to produce sulfuric acid for the local **Woodfibre** pulp and paper plant.

"Can you eat the sand? No," quipped Murray, quickly adding that 80 per cent of the Nexen land is remediated to residential building standards.

Core revitalization

Squamish hopes to drive business and people into Squamish by opening up its oceanfront property at the south end of downtown with a walkway, shops,



Larry Murray, chair of Squamish Oceanfront Development Corp., sees bright future for former logging town as waterfront frees up: "This little town is rocking and rolling"

hotel and conference centre, restaurants and recreation services.

With the land secured, the town set out to develop a community vision for its downtown and oceanfront.

Facilitated by the **University of B.C.**'s Sustainable Communities Program and the **Fraser Basin Council**, it conducted a six-month series of community workshops to produce a blueprint for the area in transition.

Squamish Council endorsed the plan in spring and created the arms-length **Squamish Oceanfront Development Corp.** to implement the new vision.

Murray is SODC's chair. But the hunt is now on for a CEO to run the corporation, which will sell the land as outlined in the community plan. SODC's profits will fund its operations.

Money leftover from the operating budget will be funnelled back into the pockets of the district, the corporation's sole shareholder.

Murray said the oceanfront will be the "jewel in the crown and the catalyst to revive the rest of the downtown."

The newly christened "Adventure Capital of Canada" is focusing on its reputation for having some of the best mountain climbing and windsurfing in North America to harness tourism as its main economic driver.

Local leaders say they won't sacrifice community goals to push through development in time for the **2010 Winter Olympics**, but clearly Squamish aims to cash in on the big event.

Murray said the town hopes to have a significant portion of the redevelopment done in time for the

Games, but the finished product might take 10 to 15 years.

'Tremendous growth'

A massive 8,000-square-foot **Sea to Sky Adventure Centre** is being built to lure visitors off Highway 99 and into town.

Work is also under way to develop an alternative energy sector. Squamish, the Coast Salish word for "Mother of the Wind," is working on a community pilot project to create a business case for wind-powered energy.

The groundwork has also been laid to make the community a post-secondary education hub, with Cap College's possible expansion and promising signals that Canada's first private secular university will soon call Squamish home.

"Squamish is so ideally positioned for tremendous growth," said a soft-spoken yet enthusiastic **Lee Malleau**, Squamish's economic development officer. "There is such proactive leadership who are ready to frankly get aggressive about what needs to be done in the community to maximize growth."

Some investors aren't waiting for the community's vision to kick in.

Real estate values shot through the roof two years ago and have since increased by about 37 per cent, said **Lisa Bjornson** during a recent interview at **Black Tusk Realty's** offices.

The residential real estate market is driven by Whistler residents who can't afford to live in the village, locals who want to upgrade and Lower Mainland residents who travel the Sea-to-Sky corridor bound for outdoor recreation destinations.

An estimated 2,000 Squamish residents commute daily to Vancouver for work; another 1,000 travel each day to Whistler.

According to Squamish mayor **Ian Sutherland**, there were more applications for residential development permits in Squamish in 2003 than in the previous four years put together.

Permits are being processed for about 1,000 residential units scheduled to be built in downtown Squamish over the next five to seven years. A total of 3,000 units are being planned over the same period for the town and its surrounding neighbourhoods, which currently boast a population of 19,000.

But the market has since cooled off, Bjornson said, as Lower Mainland investors realize Squamish isn't the deal it used to be.

"The highway is key to all of this," she said. "The oceanfront and university development is good, but the fact that road will be improved is huge."

Some skeptics

A new ski hill is also on the books for Squamish, but Bjornson said residents will believe it when they see it.

Garibaldi at Squamish Inc. wants to develop a 7,300-acre alpine resort on Mount Garibaldi. It's tied up in consultations with local First Nations.

The community is, however, starting to believe that the **Sea to Sky University**, touting enrolment projections of 1,200 students, will eventually be built, Bjornson said, now that the Mashiter Creek Bridge linking the university site to Squamish's nearby Garibaldi Highlands is complete.

"There's a much better feeling in town because the shovel actually hit the ground," said Bjornson. "And residents seem to feel confident about the oceanfront being real."

But while planners and developers rub their hands together, shop owners in the neglected downtown core are suffering. Many stores are vacant; others seem on the brink of closing.

"It's a dead town," said **Gelato Karina** owner **Gregory Fischer**. His shop, which has a lunch menu, was empty at noon during a visit last week. Fischer's wife has started a wool and yarn business on one side of the eatery to bring in extra revenues. Fischer said his family of five loves Squamish, but it's getting hard to wait for the big boom to materialize. As to the ambitious plans for the town's oceanfront, he said, "I'll believe it when I see it. Council is always promising one thing or another."

Chris Chung, who runs the **Lucky Loonie** dollar store in downtown Squamish, didn't even know about plans to turn the oceanfront land into a mini-Granville Island.

Retailers say council sold them out when it allowed big-box development along the highway. A **Wal-Mart** and **Home Depot** are being built in a business park running along Highway 99 and a factory outlet mall will soon be added.

David Fenn, a councillor and owner of the **Howe Sound Inn & Brewing Co.**, said the big-box stores were needed to capture some of the dollars being spent outside Squamish. He said 75 per cent of shopping by locals is done outside town limits.

Several developments have therefore been planned to help revitalize downtown businesses by drawing residents into the town core.

They include seniors housing, condos, townhouses and single-family homes. The team of planning staff at the district office has been quadrupled to handle the influx of applications.

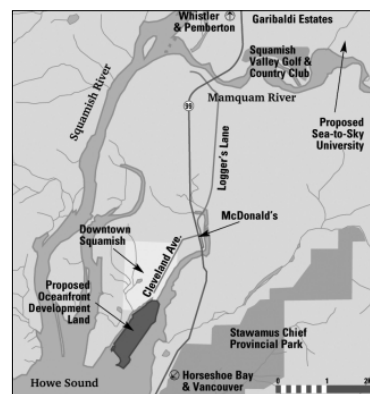
Squamish wants to flaunt its recreation assets, but remain livable, said Fenn.

"I see us more as a Kitsilano North, not a Whistler South," he said.

When asked about the biggest hurdles the town faces in its ongoing transformation, Fenn said they have already been beaten.

The remediation has been completed, the oceanfront lands have been turned over to the district and the community supports the new vision.

Quick facts



Squamish

Population 19,000

Average house price \$374,000

Average condo price \$145,000

Average income \$43,000

Main employment Construction, tourism, forestry

Mayor Sutherland said the town is in talks with private ferry operators interested in running a passenger ferry from Squamish to Vancouver and with cruise ship companies keen to dock in the town's overhauled oceanfront.

Murray added that there's also talk the company operating the industrial port at Squamish might expand the facility to handle some of the growing container business.

New University

A private university could put Squamish on the map as an educational centre.

The country's first private, non-religious university is set to charge big bucks for liberal arts and science degrees while providing undergrads with classes of no more than 25 students, said its president.

"Year after year funding goes down and the public universities end up with very large classes and an inability to focus on undergraduate young people," said **David Strangway**, president of the Sea to Sky University and a former president of the **University of B.C.**

The plan is to create a university village, tucked up in the mountains but less than an hour from Vancouver or Whistler.

The university owns the 240-acre site and will sell off the land around the campus for residential developments, using the proceeds to build and operate the university. SSU's total price tag is \$150 million.

In June, **First Cambridge Capital Inc.** bought the first tract of land for residential development: a 47-acre site that will house 200 of a planned 960 residential units. ♦