

Hotel at end of 'its useful life'

Owner of Oak Bay institution is adamant it must be replaced

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The historic 75-year-old Oak Bay Beach Hotel has too many design and construction flaws to renovate the old building on Beach Drive and needs to be demolished to make way for a new building says its owner Kevin Walker.

Most of a two-hour presentation to Oak Bay council on redevelopment plans for the property focused on the old building and why it can't be saved.

"The costs were just too great for us to maintain a financially sustainable business," said Walker. "The Oak Bay Beach Hotel simply has to change."

The session featured a PowerPoint presentation that was the opposite of a glossy tourist brochure, as architect Bas Smith showed photos of the hotel's eccentric labyrinth of hallways, stairs and fire escapes.

Many of the rooms are small and awkwardly shaped, and "have that English country-hotel look about them," he said. Bathrooms are cramped in some rooms, and most of the hotel isn't wheelchair-accessible.

"We used to market that as old world charm," Walker said later in the evening, recounting a recent comment from a frequent guest who liked the redevelopment plans, since "we're tired of being woken by the guest next door."



Oak Bay Beach Hotel has graced its Beach Drive location for 75 years. *TC file*

"Regrettably it has reached the end of its useful life," said Smith.

Mayor Christopher Causton asked Walker about some of the features in the new hotel that are "real community benefits," such as the retaining the grand lobby, fireplace and original entrance way.

"You pull stuff down and it's more expensive to fix. Are you prepared to say, whatever it takes, it will be done?"

Walker replied, "Yes."

Causton also asked Walker why he had taken on a hotel management contract at the new 22-room Miraloma on the Cove Inn at Sidney, "at a time when your plate is full."

"We want to allow our management team to spread their wings a little," said Walker. The small strata hotel in a converted 1925 mansion, formerly The Latch, requires different skills that will be useful at the new Oak Bay Beach Hotel.

He also said in an interview on Tues-

day that his company is close to signing a management contract to run another hotel. The properties will keep some staff working during the redevelopment period.

Causton also wondered about the true intentions of the Walkers, given the growing business of managing other properties.

Kevin Walker said they plan to stay with the Oak Bay Beach Hotel, and noted "there have been numerous opportunities" to sell and move on since council turned down their first redevelopment proposal in 2005. "We would have left by now if that was our intention," he said.

The Walkers return to Oak Bay council Feb. 13 for another presentation, including a massive model of the proposed new building and a two-minute computerized "flyaround" simulating views of the new hotel. After that, Walker plans three community forums around Oak Bay to hear suggestions from the public.