Newsline

New redevelopment proposal for Oak Bay Beach Hotel

Deemed uneconomical to renovate, Oak Bay Beach Hotel owner aspires to raze and then raise a new building behind the Tweed Curtain.

The 70-year-old hotel's owners have undertaken already five major renovations in the past 30 years. And more work is in order. However, instead of upgrading again, current owner **Kevin Walker** would like to start over. In December 2004, Oak Bay council rejected his proposal for a new structure. In the hopes of obtaining a development permit this time, Walker is headed back to city hall with a revised two-part presentation.

"We've poured millions of dollars into the hotel, and now we'll be recreating it," Walker says. "We discovered that seismic upgrading would cost $11 million, and it would only target the third floor. And we wouldn't be able to renovate until the seismic work had been completed. We realized the building can't earn its keep anymore."

The first facet of the new plan was presented to council on January 23, when "a pretty strong case for removing the building was made," says Oak Bay Mayor **Christopher Causton**. Part two is slated for delivery on February 13, when the need for change will be detailed.

"We're hoping council will recognized the merits of the plan and forward it to committee of the whole," Walker says.

Walker was shot down in his first foray into proposing a plan for a new hotel. His plan called for a 170,000-square-foot building rising nine storeys. "We had too much on our wish list and council turned it down, saying it was too big," Walker says. The current plan has been scaled back to five storeys and 139,000 square feet. In the five-star hotel model development, there'll be a blend of uses in the same building, he says. Residences with two bedrooms and a den will measure 1,500 square feet. One-bedroom units will total 750 square feet, while hotel rooms will come in at 400 square feet. "The entire inventory would be strata," he says.

Though the hotel has no heritage designation, Walker has hired an architectural historian who is "helping to define heritage preservation," he says. "This project is considered adaptive reuse, taking certain elements and adapting them for reuse. It seems to fit the current vernacular."

The lobby of the venerable structure along with the fireplace and the front door will be re-positioned in the new building, Walker says. "The Snug bar will be as it was when it first opened in the 50s. The former seaside saltwater pool will return as a hot mineral pool for the spa, and the Oak Bay Theatre will be recreated for special events and regular film productions."

But first the proposal must be approved. "The land use contract will have to be discharged, the official community plan will have to be changed, and the site must be rezoned," says Nigel Beattie, director of building and planning for the municipality. "It's currently zoned three-storey, multi-family residential. If everything went perfectly, the process would take six months, but it generally takes more than a year."

Though the process has just begun, the municipality has already received complaints, Causton says. "Blasting will be necessary to build three storeys of underground parking, and the neighbours will be concerned about that. Since the proposed structure will be three times as large as the existing hotel, scale will be an issue. This is not a replacement."

To address public concerns, Walker has set up a redevelopment centre in the hotel. "People are coming through by the hundreds. As they examine the facts, they want to support this future vision. There will also be public forums in February."

According to Mayor Causton, there is huge interest in the project. "It's one of the signature landmark rezonings in the community. The hotel is one of the icons of Victoria. The hotel is well established and accepted. Who hasn't been to the Snug? It's part of the fabric of the community. I'd hate to see no bar, no restaurant, no hotel on the site."

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