

Development charges killing Coquitlam plan



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URBAN VIEW

The City of Coquitlam recently put together a plan for the redevelopment of the northeast part of the municipality, providing access to land for much-needed affordable housing in the Lower Mainland's primary growth corridor.

Now Coquitlam council is considering a series of discriminatory taxes that will kill the plan.

The Northeast Coquitlam Area Plan covers the south slope of Burke Mountain. Today, the area consists of large acreages developed over the last 30 to 40 years, with a population of

less than 500.

The community plan for Burke Mountain calls for protecting almost 7,000 acres of parks, forests and streams and sensitively integrating a number of local neighbourhoods on about 1,100 acres at Burke Mountain's base, all concentrated around a compact urban village centre.

A mix of housing types, from smaller-lot, single-family homes to townhouses and ground-oriented apartments, are planned for the area.

This plan is a departure from the typical growth pattern that has dominated sprawl in suburbs like Coquitlam. It reflects a desire to create a more compact community to minimize impacts on the environment and support public transit.

The Northeast Coquitlam Area Plan has been hailed by many as a visionary plan. It sets the bar quite high, embracing a number of sustainable development principles, concentrating regional growth.

But there are costs associated with the development of Burke Mountain, just like there are costs associated with every new development. Infra-

structure like roads, bridges, water reservoirs, sewer lines and the like have to be built to accommodate new growth.

Municipalities raise funds to help pay for those costs by charging fees on new development. Usually, a growing city like Coquitlam levies those fees across the municipality, charging the same for every new lot or new housing unit.

This time, however, Coquitlam council is proposing a series of development cost charges (DCCs) that will unfairly burden property owners on Burke Mountain.

These DCC are to be charged on top of sewer and water connection fees that have already been set exclusively for developments on Burke Mountain.

These proposed taxes are not small amounts of money. For every new single family lot created on Burke Mountain, the city is proposing a tax of more than \$33,000. For every townhouse on Burke Mountain, the levy will be more than \$22,400.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in Coquitlam, taxes on new development will

fall from \$12,750 per lot for single family homes to \$12,718 and from the current \$8,700 for townhouses to \$8,459.

Municipalities have considerable discretion in taxing new development. But the provincial government and the development community got together a few years ago and wrote a Best Practices Guide on development cost charges to put some parameters around this discretion so municipalities wouldn't discourage growth.

Coquitlam's proposed fees violate just about every best practice listed in the guide.

New homeowners on Burke Mountain will be solely burdened with the costs associated with building new arterial roads and bridges, contrary to the Guide's recommended best practice that states "road DCCs should be established on a municipal-wide basis unless a significant disparity exists between those who pay the DCC and benefiting users."

Explain that to future Burke Mountain residents who will be watching not just other Coquitlam residents scoot along the new David Avenue

east-west arterial, but also all of their neighbouring Ridge-Meadows commuters who will likely use the new route to avoid congestion on the Lougheed highway.

Had the city applied the Best Practices Guide to formulate a new charge for water and sewer infrastructure instead of simply imposing a discriminatory neighbourhood-specific connection fee, again they would have encountered recommended best practices that suggest such charges should be municipal-wide.

More than 150 Burke Mountain property owners gathered at a community meeting recently to try to make sense of the city's attack on their neighbourhood.

The question on the minds of most property owners was: What's motivating their city councillors to consider such discriminatory taxes?

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