

Property buyer defining Surrey's centre

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REAL ESTATE MATTERS

Call it what you want — the next great city at the edge of Vancouver or the city next to Vancouver with a bit of an edge. Surrey is already beginning to emerge as the urban centre of a new metropolitan area south of the Fraser River.

Last year, UBC Professor Patrick Condon noted in an article that Surrey was poised to become the heart of a second great city south of the Fraser River. Two major breakthroughs are starting to bring hope to many of those who have struggled with positioning Surrey for a future that will inevitably arrive.

One of Surrey's challenges has been defining its downtown. Surrey's urban focus can be hard to define. As a typical suburb, development tends to spread out instead of up. The arrival of SkyTrain was supposed to change that pattern with new growth that was to be concentrated around Surrey's three transit stations. That focus has been blurry until recently.

It looks like it is now possible to make a real downtown out of the few blocks that surround

True transit village planned

From K4

the Surrey Central SkyTrain station. This area has been somewhat of an urban wasteland infected by the street problems that inevitably gather around a barren bus loop and rail transit stop. The momentum for change began with the development of the new Simon Fraser University campus located in the tower recently built at Surrey Place Mall, next to the SkyTrain station.

To build on that momentum, a group of planners with the city of Surrey and TransLink got together last year and they have been working closely with the local community and developers to craft what looks like a new land use plan for a true transit village for the three or four new blocks to be created with a grid of new streets around the SkyTrain station.

The city seems willing to do whatever it takes to kick-start what planners hope will be a series of private developments in the area — most of them high density residential, including both high-rise and medium-rise development. If this plan is approved, we could see some of the region's new housing supply begin to come on the market in a new downtown Surrey.

The second challenge Surrey has always struggled with is overcoming some image problems that have stemmed from a few neglected neighbourhoods. If these neighbourhoods were in the centre of a dense urban core, like Vancouver's downtown eastside, we might call them gritty neighbourhoods of character.

If it were in the inner city, instead of being neglected by a number of absentee landlords as parts of Whalley are, the neighbourhood would be over-managed by a multiple layers of bureaucratic social engineering.

Whalley, in the few blocks around King George Highway and 108th Avenue, doesn't have nearly the social problems that come from the concentration of a monotype of housing like Vancouver's downtown eastside.

It simply suffers from a lot of the symptoms of suburban sprawl. Low density. Little focus for commercial activity. Exclusionary rules around uses instead of mixed uses. An obsession with the automobile. All of this has created a reputation that has scared people away from investing in the area.

Now, one developer is plunging into Whalley in a big way.

Charan Sethi and his Tien Sher Group are taking advantage of lower land prices in Whalley and the opportunity to provide a mix of medium and higher density housing close to the Gateway SkyTrain station. This neighbourhood will be a secondary neighbourhood centre next to Surrey Central. It will also be a prominent symbolic gateway to Surrey at the King George Highway entrance to the region.

At East Whalley Ring Road and 108th Avenue Tien Sher has assembled a 5.7 acre of land that is currently occupied by older single-family homes on large lots. They have applied to rezone the lands to permit the construction of almost 500 homes in four-storey buildings, with 9,000 square feet of street-front commercial space.

Across the street, Tien Sher has an option to purchase a further four acres fronting on King George Highway. The city of Surrey wants this site to be developed as a signature gateway project.

Tien Sher is currently looking at the feasibility of building three or four high-rise towers on the site containing about 1,000 homes.

Two factors drive Sethi's enthusiasm for this Surrey location — affordability and accessibility.

With little development in the area, lower land prices will allow Sethi to bring new homes to the market at relatively affordable prices.

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