

Esquimalt Chamber of Commerce - Feedback on the Official Community Plan Draft.

This document summarizes the feedback from the Esquimalt business community via the Esquimalt Chamber of Commerce on the draft OCP.

First off, the Esquimalt Chamber of Commerce would like to commend the Township for the public consultations and consideration for public input that has gone into preparing this document. The document (as prepared for the first reading) was community-focussed and balanced the social and economic diversity and growth of Esquimalt.

There are three specific areas of feedback that we would like to put forward: The Vision, the Economic Development section and Regional Context Statement; and the first-reading motions to change zoning to limit construction to six stories.

Vision

One can infer, from reading the OCP document, that there is a sense of vision; however, the vision statement does not convey a vision at all. It is a “values statement” at best and in no way does it describe where Esquimalt is headed. The vision statement should answer the question, “What does Esquimalt strive to look like in ten years?”.

The reason this is important is because when making decisions around zoning, development, spending amenity funds, or anything of significance, the vision should be the guiding principal. Council members should ask the question, “how does my decision help Esquimalt move towards its vision?”. Without a clear vision, it will prove difficult for Esquimalt to move forward in any one direction. Without clear vision, there is little guidance for development and Esquimalt may be a less stable place for business investment than a community with clear vision. Savvy developers (like the Corvette Landing Developers) use the OCP as a guiding document when they make land purchase decisions and prepare their proposals.

We encourage this council to articulate a vision for Esquimalt and make it the guiding principal for the decisions that will shape the Township.

Economic Development section and Regional Context Statement

In general, the Chamber of Commerce supports these sections of the draft OCP. These statements are significant in that they do not stand alone. In order to achieve the policy goals, it is important that other sections of the OCP (like zoning) support the statements outlined in this section.

Of note, the Regional Context Statement addresses a serious problem for the whole CRD - that being workforce housing. The challenge of housing people close to where they work may be a regional issue, but Esquimalt has a responsibility to play a significant role in this because it is the workplace for a huge number of people that don't live close by. By recognizing this, and contributing to a solution, Esquimalt is truly stepping up to the plate and helping reduce traffic congestion, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and improving quality of life for local workers.

These people are working here anyway, by housing them in Esquimalt, we are taking advantage of the location of their workplace to increase the social and economic prosperity of our community. The Regional Context Statement states:

“Through its densification policies, the Official Community Plan strives to house employees closer to the employment centres thereby helping to create compact communities and reducing greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the need to commute. In addition, the Official Community Plan supports the attraction of a wide range of business types including advanced-technology, green economy, and knowledge based.”

This is good. It is important that other aspects of the OCP, including zoning, support this statement.

On a separate topic. It is also noteworthy that West Bay warrants its own section in the OCP. The West Bay area is somewhat unique and worthy of singling out with its own priorities. Conspicuous in its absence however, is the Town Centre area of Esquimalt Road and vicinity. Although mentioned here and there, it might be worth considering adding a section about this area given that development of this area is of significant strategic importance for Esquimalt.

Related to this and the vision comment, there is fear among some that there is little direction to potential developers related to architecture, theme, commercial use, etc. If one looks at exemplary examples of development around the world, one can see how art and architecture and a focus on mixed use can create vibrant living/working spaces where taller developments add interest to the mix. Melbourne Australia is an example of this. This type of direction really should flow from a vision.

A final comment on economic growth is around mandating commercial space in developments, particularly on Esquimalt Rd. Understanding that footprint-space is very tight, people-flow (traffic/parking/pedestrian and biking) are all very important and should be developed in conjunction with commercial development. Without mandated commercial / retail space on Esquimalt Rd, there is a risk of creating a corridor that cannot support its own growth, and actually increases traffic congestion if people need to leave their neighborhood to do their shopping.

First-reading motions to alter zoning and limit height to six stories.

The Chamber of Commerce is opposed to changes in zoning that reduce height to six stories. Besides reducing potential densification, and the obvious economic benefits of that, there are some serious problems that may fall out from this move.

Having watched the first reading video, it is apparent that the impetus for this move was public feedback on the development at Head St and Esquimalt Rd. It is noteworthy that there was public input on the Head St development. Given that the blocks of development land are generally quite small, there will usually be variances requested in order to make the developments economically viable. Having an area zoned for 12 stories does not mean it's a

slam-dunk for a 12-story development. The developer still has a process to follow, there is still the APC, and DRC, as well as council (and the opportunity for public input as in the Head St development) if there are variances. It is not necessary to limit development to six stories along the whole Esquimalt Rd corridor, nor advisable.

Limiting height to six stories will prevent the development of a hotel in Esquimalt. As part of the economic growth of Esquimalt, it is well recognized that a hotel can act as a significant business support amenity, as well as an important tourism-growth asset for the community. Limiting to six stories will most likely prevent the development of a hotel for many, many years. The majority of potential development properties are fairly small, meaning that an economically viable hotel will be situated on a small footprint necessitating more than six stories.

Typically, wood frame construction is limited to six stories, and going above six stories necessitates concrete and steel construction... this is more expensive and usually becomes viable at about 12 stories. It should be noted from the recently-approved Corvette Landing development, that new technologies like Cross Laminated Timber (CLT) construction reduce the environmental impact of development and also reduce the height of buildings... a CLT building of ten stories is only the height of a traditional nine story building due to reduced space between floors. The point being, a 12-story limit will allow for innovative buildings some of which may not be as high as traditional 12-story buildings. Limiting to six stories will reduce the amount of development and innovation coming to Esquimalt. Also of note, built on a hill, there is no 12-story face to Corvette Landing, limiting to six stories would have unreasonably prevented this development from coming forward.

The next point is related to the aforementioned workforce housing. A lot of people work at the Esquimalt Graving Yard and CFB Esquimalt. Limiting buildings to six stories will not allow Esquimalt to play a significant role in housing people close to where they work, especially if there is a push to encourage commercial space in a six-story building, leaving only five stories for residential in an area that desperately needs denser housing solutions. There are better solutions, that include leaving the zoning at 12 stories and the encouragement of targeting a working demographic.

Changing zoning to six stories is a one-way trip. One might feel bad for the person who is going to lose his view of the harbour as Corvette Landing goes up; however, he did buy across from an area zoned for 12 stories, so his purchase decision and property value should have taken that into account. If that area was zoned for six stories, and later re-zoned to 12 stories (either on a variance or future OCP change), then a person who bought across from a six-story zoning and had their property value affected by the erection of a 12-story building has very legitimate grounds for complaint. It is way easier for council and the APC and DRC to approve a development based on its merits with current zoning, than it would be for the most amazing building to be approved above six stories in the future if zoned as such.

Finally, there was a lot of public input (from both residents and business owners) that went into the draft OCP. The document was the culmination of this process, and items like zoning had

been developed to support other aspects, like economic growth. Changing the zoning to limit height to six stories during the first reading is significant and somewhat flies in the face of the whole OCP public input and development process. There are definitely some considerations (such as those mentioned above) that were not taken into account when these motions were presented in council.

Conclusion

In closing, the Chamber would like to request that more time be spent developing a vision statement that will act as a guide for this and future councils, as well as future developers and investors in Esquimalt.

The Chamber supports the Economic Development section and the Regional Context Statement throughout the document, but cautions that zoning must support those statements.

The Chamber is very much opposed to changes in zoning that limit development and density to six stories from 12. If there is a need to change zoning that will affect development, then it should be done with careful consideration to public input gathered to date, careful consideration to economic impact, and it should be made in the context of a strong vision. We request that council revisit this issue and we encourage maintaining the 12-story zoning.

Thank you for the opportunity to review this document and the invitation to provide feedback on behalf of the Esquimalt Business community.

Regards,

Chris Edley CD PEng
President Esquimalt Chamber of Commerce