

WESTCOASTNEWS

SATURDAY APRIL 4 | 2009 | EDITOR ADRIENNE TANNER | ATANNER@VANCOUVERSUN.COM 604.605.2445 | ✨

CITY HALL

Mayor tries to boost rental housing

Vancouver wants to stimulate economy by encouraging the construction of apartments

BY DARAH HANSEN
VANCOUVER SUN

Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson has released details of a "bold" plan designed to stimulate the sagging economy and encourage badly needed rental-housing construction in Vancouver.

"This is new stuff," Robertson said in an interview Friday.

The strategy, which has yet to be approved by council, calls for the fast-tracking of development proposals that would add to the city's existing rental housing stock as early as next year.

Incentives include a relaxation of cost-

ly parking requirements, increased density allowances and reductions in development cost levies and property tax exemptions for up to 10 years.

Each development would be eligible for its own combination of incentives in accordance with the number of rental units proposed and how soon the construction could break ground.

It's the first "major" step in a broader economic development strategy planned for the city, Robertson said, adding, "Other municipalities haven't gone this far or been this aggressive."

Vancouver, like other municipalities, has been struggling as development slowed and construction jobs were lost.

The number of development permits currently before the city is down 50 per cent this year from last, according to Coun. Raymond Louie, who chairs council's finance committee.

The city is hoping the new stimulus plan will boost those figures, potentially creating "thousands of jobs," said Robertson.

But equally critical to the strategy is the construction of rental housing.

"We have a huge shortage," Robertson said.

Vacancy rates in Vancouver continue to hover well below one per cent, sending rental prices soaring. According to statistics provided by the city, renters

pay on average \$936 a month for a one-bedroom suite in Vancouver.

Most of the units were built in the 1950s, '60s and '70s when federal tax incentives existed to support rental housing construction.

That program no longer exists, and rental construction became too expensive for developers to invest in, Louie said.

The new incentive plan is designed to reduce those costs enough to encourage immediate construction, he said.

Vancouver's plan — set to be introduced later this month to a specialized "round table" of stakeholders — comes one month after Surrey Mayor Dianne

Watts garnered rave reviews from the business community for her city's radical recession-busting strategy.

Surrey has called for the creation of tax-free economic zones, as well as reduced development cost charges and building permit fees in a bid to attract developers and generate jobs during the economic downturn.

The new incentives would apply to projects worth more than \$10 million that are under construction before the end of 2010.

A typical \$20-million project would save about three to four per cent in costs.

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New convention centre: Triple the space, and officially open



PHOTOS BY GLENN BAGLO/VANCOUVER SUN

The Vancouver Convention & Exhibition Centre expansion that began life as a \$495-million project officially opened Friday as an \$883.2-million facility with more than triple the old centre's meeting space.

Featuring Canada's largest green roof with 400,000 indigenous plants and grasses spread

over more than two hectares, the new centre will offer conventioners about 500,000 square feet of meeting space and a 55,000-square-foot ballroom with five-storey ceilings and unique North Shore mountain views. Cost overruns aside, PavCo president Warren Buckley said the investment was needed to keep Vancouver from losing more

international convention business due to a lack of meeting space.

"We began losing business 10 years after the original centre opened [in 1986] because we couldn't attract the kinds of conventions that wanted to come to Vancouver," he said in an interview.



PRETRIAL CENTRE

Mayors to consider prison site

Plans to place facility in Burnaby were cancelled last month

BY JONATHAN FOWLIE
VANCOUVER SUN

VICTORIA — Metro Vancouver mayors received a report Friday outlining 60 possible sites for a new provincial pretrial facility.

Last month, Solicitor-General John van Dongen cancelled plans to build a prison at a controversial site in Burnaby and announced he would ask the mayors to propose a location by Sept. 1.

At the time of that announcement, van Dongen promised to release a now two-year old report that looks at 60 potential sites.

That document shows Richmond and Surrey have the most proposed locations, each with 11 suggested sites. Delta has eight potential sites and Vancouver has one.

Other communities with proposed sites include Abbotsford, Burnaby, Coquitlam, Chilliwack, Langley, Maple Ridge, Mission, New Westminster and Port Coquitlam.

On Friday, van Dongen said he will meet with mayors this weekend to discuss the issue, adding they are free to make suggestions for a site.

"They will review everything. They don't have to confine themselves to the sites in the report," he said Friday.

"My expectation is that they look at all potential sites," he added.

Van Dongen also said the government will pay for a consultant who can help the mayors in their deliberations.

The government's initial prison proposal became a hot issue in Burnaby, with the New Democratic Party demanding the Liberals scrap plans for the site, and the government accusing the NDP of playing politics with an issue essential in the fight against crime.

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