

Matthew Hoekstra photo

Construction will soon begin at a long vacant development site between Bayview Street and the Fraser River boardwalk.

Onni moves onward in Steveston

After nearly a decade of ownership, developer now set for groundbreaking

by Matthew Hoekstra

Staff Reporter

Construction is set to begin on a narrow strip of contentious Steveston real estate boasting some of the best views of the South Arm of the Fraser River.

The city has approved building permits for Onni Development's Bayview Street lands—the last of its Imperial Landing parcels—and construction is expected to start in the fall, said Chris Evans, vice-president.

"We're excited about getting the last phase of Imperial Landing started. It's really a great legacy piece of property and we're looking forward to groundbreaking and moving forward," he said yesterday.

Onni had faced a summer deadline from the city to obtain building permits for the site or risk further delays. On July 26, city hall issued permits with a construction value of $13.9 million for the property.

In the last seven years, Onni has made repeated attempts to allow more residential space in the development, and open up the site's restrictive maritime-use zoning to allow for a broader range of commercial tenants.

Its last rezoning proposal came one year ago. It called for two residential high-rises—10 and 12 storeys—and set aside two acres of land for the city and $500,000 for the Steveston Community Society.

The project would have brought 200 new homes to Steveston Village, but facing fierce opposition from residents, Onni scrapped the idea a few months after it surfaced.

Now the developer will build approximately 60,000 square feet of residential space atop 60,000 square feet of commercial space, which is restricted to maritime- and fishing-related businesses.

Six buildings will be constructed along the waterfront, with heights ranging from one to three storeys, and 52 homes are expected.

The land, although fenced, has become part of a walkway along Steveston's riverfront, which Coun. Bill McNulty called "a jewel." He said he's disappointed the opportunity for open space has been lost.

"The city will get something out of it but it won't get the deal it should have had—which would have been the optimum one—which would have been as much open space as we can," he said. "I wish we had the money to buy it."

McNulty said he respects residents' opinions against the alternative of two high-rises, but said there were other options and compromises he wished "we could have considered."

"The unfortunate thing is we're going to lose a valuable open space."

For its part, Onni decided against a third attempt to rezone the land. Steveston is a community sensitive to change, said Evans, adding Onni couldn't find a compromise through the public process.

"We worked hard at that and with the community but were never able to find a reasonable solution that worked for everyone."

Evans said Onni will own the commercial space and lease it to tenants.

"It's such a remarkable location that our belief is we'll get it built and then really work through tenancies and the residential piece, once it's built."

Construction could be complete by next year.

The project is one-third of the scale of another Onni development underway in Richmond. Across from the Richmond Olympic Oval, Onni is building Ora, a three-tower mixed-use development.

Imperial Landing timeline

- 1998: B.C. Packers submits rezoning application
- 1999: Application reaches third reading
- 2001: Council approves rezoning in 5-4 vote; Onni buys site
- 2003: Onni tables new plan for Bayview site
- 2004: Council orders revisions to application
- 2006: Onni holds open houses
- 2007: Council orders more revisions
- 2010: Onni seeks development permit that conforms to existing zoning; later submits and withdraws rezoning application for two high-rises
- 2011: City approves building permits under original rezoning



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