

Times Colonist (Victoria)

Getting it right: Ucluelet embraced development without sacrificing community

Sun Nov 26 2006
Page: D5

Section: Islander

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Source: Special to Times Colonist

Illustrations: Colour Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to Times Colonist / The seven-kilometre long Wild Coast Trail gives Ucluelet residents and visitors numerous vantage points like this one to view the rugged coastline.

Colour Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to Times Colonist / Ucluelet is booming but new developments like the Whiskey Landing commercial/residential development must be appropriate for the community, not like something imported from Mexico

Colour Photo: Suzanne Morphet, Special to Times Colonist / The Black Rock Oceanfront Resort is the first of five new hotels destined for Ucluelet. It's scheduled to be completed by the end of 2007.

After years of being scorned as Tofino's "ugly stepsister" or "poor cousin," the town at the other end of Long Beach on the Island's west coast is entering a building boom that will force Tofino to share the tourism spotlight.

Ucluelet, or Ukee, as it's fondly called by the locals, is not in any danger of running out of fresh water during a dry summer, as Tofino almost did this year. Perhaps more importantly, locals aren't being squeezed out of the housing market as real estate prices take off. In fact, the district has won numerous planning awards for the way it's encouraging development without sacrificing quality of life for its residents.

Only 1,652 people live here, but Ucluelet has about \$800 million worth of development on the books, including a Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course and five hotels. But before it was faced with any major development pressure, council and staff worked to put appropriate policies and infrastructure in place.

"We knew it was coming; we saw Tofino down the road. We looked at it like a crystal ball and said, 'You know what? It's going to happen to us,'" recalls Felice Mazzoni, Ucluelet's director of planning. "I mean, we're right next to the national park (Pacific Rim National Park), the (Clayoquot Sound) Biosphere Reserve and Barkley Sound. We're in an excellent location for tourists to start coming here. We don't have the infrastructure [so] let's start building it."

Ucluelet started by coming up with an Official Community Plan in 1993 that included a lot of new policies to address tourism. With fishing and forestry both in decline, community leaders knew the town had to diversify or die. Mazzoni says they were open to development, but not at any cost.

"We have a very good council. They're not scared of asking for things from developers ... they're pro-development as long as it's the right kind of development. We don't want buildings that look like they're from Mexico."

And because the community already has two sources of water -- one an aquifer that won't dry up in the course of a dry summer -- Ucluelet can meet the heavy demands of resorts with clients who want hot tubs to soak in after they've washed down their

surfboards and wetsuits from an afternoon on the beach.

Ucluelet's efforts have been recognized this year by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities, the Planning Institute of British Columbia, the Union of B.C. Municipalities and, most recently, the International Awards for Liveable Communities.

Even though they've set the bar high for developers -- the Official Community Plan requires they set aside 15 to 20 per cent of any development for staff housing or affordable housing and follow LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) standards -- Mazzoni says it hasn't discouraged interest.

"No, I mean it just keeps coming and we keep upping the policies. You know, density bonusing where we exchange density for amenities or parkland or cash and through that we've raised about \$10 million in cash and land, fee-simple land, and parkland and basketball courts and skateboard parks, so developers are giving back to the community."

A new residential subdivision going in amongst the towering trees on the western side of Ucluelet has attracted an equal number of residents and non-residents, some from as far away as Europe, and many from Alberta. However, the locals got first crack at the lots, ranging from \$160,000 to \$220,000. "If you're a local, you get 15 to 20 per cent off the market rate before the unit ever gets into the broader market," says Mazzoni, adding that he has purchased a lot here himself and loves Ucluelet's funky character.

By comparison, some would say Tofino put the cart before the horse by encouraging development before proper infrastructure was in place. This year's water shortage is just one example. In summer months, when Tofino's population balloons from about 1,500 full-time residents to 22,000 people, seasonal workers struggle to find affordable accommodation and visitors fight for parking spots.

"Tofino was about 10 years ahead of us, then they were five years ahead of us and now some people say that they're behind us, because of the troubles," says Mazzoni. "They've run out of water, the infrastructure is failing, and Ucluelet has got lots of

water and lots of sewer capacity and we've planned it out, slowly and carefully."

Mazzoni, who was born in Tofino and raised in Ucluelet, says Tofino residents no longer have easy access to the great beaches that have made the town famous. "Unfortunately, they lost a lot of their access points, indirectly through development ... the locals come to go on the trails and they're not there anymore."

In Ucluelet, he says, access to the waterfront has been guaranteed by building linkage trails to the seven-kilometre long Wild Pacific Trail that hugs the rugged shoreline.

The first of the big new hotels going up is Black Rock Oceanfront Resort, a 132-unit strata development that sold out in just four hours in 2005. The resort, nestled in 8.5 acres of rainforest and facing the open Pacific Ocean, promises unbeatable views for storm watching when it's finished in late 2007.

But even before the big, fancy resorts open, more and more tourists are discovering Ucluelet. Cliff McCool, owner of Reef Point Cottage Management, was amazed by the 56 per cent occupancy his resort cottages experienced last year. "For our second year in business that's a phenomenal number. We have far exceeded our expectations."

Even with all the new hotels coming on stream -- including an expansion of his own resort -- McCool isn't afraid of overkill. "You park your car outside a hotel front door at 10 on a Saturday night in August and watch the people getting turned around and heading back to Port Alberni ... So we don't need necessarily more people here, we just need people to be able to stay for three or four days."

But Rich Parlee, owner of Eagle Shore Inn, thinks Ucluelet still has its work cut out educating people about where it is and what it offers. "People ask, 'Can we get to Long Beach from there, or do you have to go to Tofino?' That's what they ask."

With all the attention Ucluelet has been getting this year, that ignorance of West Coast geography is bound to disappear. At the town office, Felice Mazzoni has just come back from helping pick up the district's latest awards in Hangzhou, China, where he was bowled over by the praise Ucluelet received for its grassroots approach to community planning and for developing an official community plan with a limited budget and meagre staff -- he's the only full-time planner.

"The international judges were thoroughly impressed," he says, adding that the District of Ucluelet was the only community in North America to be invited to the final stage of the Sustainable Awards competition. Mazzoni is quick to share the praise with tourism management students from Malaspina University College in Nanaimo. The district formed an alliance with Malaspina in 2004 and since then has hired students to work on its community plan, assist with tourism-related research,

and organize and implement public consultation activities. The judges lauded the community-university research alliance as "surely an example of the world's best practice."

Victoria resident Suzanne Morphet is a member of the Professional Writers' Association of Canada.