

Bowen Island- Multiple Villages

BACKGROUND

What is This Place?

Bowen Island has always and will continue to play a wider role as one of many communities in the lower mainland. This role has been largely recreational given the natural beauty of the island and the proximity to Vancouver. However, it has developed as a bedroom community for people who enjoy life in a slower-paced rural community, and require access to the city for a variety of reasons including work. Canada's aging demographics mean that Bowen may become even more of a retirement community than it already is.

Auto Dependency and Large Lot Development

The convenient access to the wilderness that Bowen provides has been eroded over the years by two factors: 1) the proliferation of a large lot development pattern that compromises the wilderness making it less and less accessible, and 2) increasing cost of, and reliance on the automobile for access from the mainland.

Large lot development is car-dependant development. I suspect there are extremely few people on Bowen who carry out their regular tasks such as shopping, visiting friends, seeing the doctor or attending civic meetings, without the use of their automobile. While this may seem normal to the people who live this kind of a lifestyle, it is an historic and geographic anomaly, that is only shared with the other Gulf Islands or islands that are part of U.S. sphere of influence.

It is a pattern based on an extensive road and driveway network that carves up the island and affects natural drainage patterns. It often results in the removal of trees throughout the island to allow for daylight and views. It is also dependant on a fleet of large energy-inefficient and highly subsidized ferries to carry cars back and forth from the mainland to the islands.

Two Elephants

If we are to speak of a vision for the future of Bowen Island, we are deluding ourselves if we do not acknowledge the presence of two elephants in the room known as Climate Change and Peak Oil or Peak Resource exploitation. We cannot prove definitively that these two elephants are in the room, but there appears to be close to unanimity amongst respected climatologists and petroleum geologists that these are very real and serious phenomena. When the inevitable happens (probably sooner than most people realize), we can expect the most severe economic and social breakdowns of communities that are most dependent on carbon fuels, particularly in the large air-conditioned and car dependent suburbs of a warming U.S. south. As a country that is less negatively affected by climate change, Canada can expect huge migration pressures from people from around the world, including people from the U.S. south. Those who think they will be able to resist the pressure for more development on Bowen are extremely naïve.

Place-Based Communities

The economic and social structures of compact, place-based communities will be far more resilient and adaptable to the realities of a “post-carbon” world. They will also be more affordable and attractive to younger people, especially those who have come to Canada from developing countries, and whose presence will be required to support an aging population.

Preserved Landscape

A development pattern of compact villages preserves environmentally sensitive ecosystems, parkland and appropriate areas for small-scale farming and community gardens.

Compact, Efficient and Environmental Services

Compact villages offer the possibility of innovative, integrated, collective and sustainable energy, water and sewage systems.

Bowen Island Today

Bowen Island currently has a population of 3,500 people, and with current zoning has a potential for 1,500 lots, which translates into about 3,700 additional people, mostly on large lots. If the current pattern continues it will inevitably lead to more roads, more traffic and greater car-ferry dependency, as well as the loss of natural ecosystems and potentially farmable land. This won't take long and because of it Bowen Island will be less resilient as a community to respond to the great challenges that face us.

PROPOSAL

Multiple Villages

I suggest that residents and municipal officials consider a moratorium on any large lot development, and instead set up a mechanism whereby development rights would have to be transferred to a series of compact villages located on different parts of the island. The location of these villages would be governed by impact on sensitive ecological systems, existing and potential farmland and proximity to existing roads. These villages could include a revitalized Snug Cove, other seaside villages on other sides of the island and perhaps one or two inland villages.

Consider the adoption of a bylaw that will disallow any new structure that will not be a contiguous part of one of these villages. In other words all future buildings should be accessible by foot and public transit.

Robust Villages

Consider that most new buildings be compact two-storey, zero-lot and connected structures that could accommodate more than just dwelling units, but places of work and other commercial activities. These dwellings could range from simple small structures housing one or two people to larger more elaborate structures housing extended families. Consider village types similar to new car-free villages of Loreto Bay in Baja Mexico.

< <http://architecture.about.com/od/buildyourhous1/ig/Villages-of-Loreto-Bay/>>

Robust Construction Methods

Consider exploring construction methods that provide energy efficiency and that use materials which have minimum environmental impact and low cost. For instance there are people on Vancouver Island, who have been developing techniques using traditional cob construction that meet current seismic and thermal requirements, as well as being extremely comfortable and economical. As a non-combustible material it lends itself to a traditional, contiguous, courtyard building typology suitable for compact villages.

< <http://dufferinpark.ca/cobcourtyard/pdf/globeandmail-madeofmud.pdf>>

Streets, Roads, Paths and Commons

Consider village street networks, which provide adequate fire fighting access while limiting the incursion of the automobile, and certainly not requiring but perhaps restricting the storage of automobiles on private property. Consider central locations for the storage of automobiles including commonly owned vehicles using the model of the Vancouver Cooperative Auto Network. Streets should be scaled to pedestrians and could lead to inter-village paths, which also provide access to the wilderness. Existing roads should be made friendlier for bike use. (Yes, new e-bikes currently on the market will ease the difficulty of climbing Bowen hills)

A denser, more compact village configuration goes hand in hand with a lively commons that includes village squares, markets and playing fields. The current commons in Snug Cove is largely unused, as it has no physical relation to enough people living close enough to it.

Water Taxi

The new water taxi service to Granville Island has allowed many people easy and low impact accessibility to Bowen Island. A series of compact seaside villages would support and reinforce an extended small-scale ferry system, which would be a model for all communities along the coast.

-Rob Grant

22/10/09

(Rob Grant has practiced architecture in Vancouver for over thirty years. He and his wife have considered moving to Bowen Island, but are concerned they would be sacrificing their low stress, car-free life where most of their friends are within easy walking or cycling distance.)