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eastside edition

Realtor plays both sides of fence

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The rise of Richmond



by Alison Appelbe

contributing writer

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population, and a lucrative and ever-expanding Vancouver International Airport, Richmond has boomed. In 20 years its population has almost doubled. With more than 60 per cent of residents now constituting a visible minority, the small but growing city is unique in Canada.

The municipality that has long been a mix of agricultural and residential has adopted an unequivocal pro-business, pro-growth philosophy. That Richmond Centre's neophyte MLA (and B.C.'s tourism and sport minister) is Richmond developer Olga Ilich speaks volumes. Expansion and development are almost a religion here.

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Continued

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HILLCREST POOL • NPA DUMPS JAMIE LEE • THUMBSUCKER

Once sleepy and ignored, Richmond is booming thanks to the airport, wide-open development policies and Asian malls like Aberdeen Centre owned by Fairchild's Thomas Fung

cover

With RAV on the way, future so bright city officials wearing rose-tinted sunglasses

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In a main-floor cafe—a stark contrast to Vancouver City Hall’s basement cafeteria—city communications manager Ted Townsend notes the growth: “We’re always going to be in the shadow of Vancouver, but when you look around at what’s going on it’s phenomenal.”

Flush with municipal tax dollars, Richmond is embarking on a plan to develop its central business district into an urban hub that may one day resemble the residential areas of north False Creek or Coal Harbour. The big spur is the \$1.9-billion Richmond-Airport-Vancouver rapid transit (RAV) line, which will run elevated along No. 3 Road, with five stops, when completed in 2009.

RICHMOND EXPECTS its population of 180,800 to increase by 32,800 by 2021, though Townsend says that’s a conservative estimate. A majority of newcomers are expected to live in apartments and townhouses in a re-designed central district roughly bounded by Sea Island Way, Garden City Road, Blundell Road, No. 2 Road and River Road.

The town centre will embrace the central business district, bisected by No. 3 Road, and the shoreline of the Middle Arm of the Fraser River. No fewer than 35 residential complexes are in the application process, with some including commercial developments.

To the east, a mega-plan for the West Cambie area has been approved. It includes townhouses and other lower-density housing for 6,000, and businesses with 2,000 jobs. South of the city centre, well away from the most aircraft-sensitive zones, the city is considering allowing buildings to rise above the permitted maximum height of 147 feet.

In the city centre, city officials hope the addition of walkways, pocket parks, plazas, and other pedestri-



Once Canada’s largest fishing port, Steveston has retained its village charm, despite a condo boom that has transformed the South Arm of the Fraser River shoreline. photo Dan Toulgoet

an-oriented amenities will reduce the dominance of the auto. “We plan to make it into a liveable and walkable downtown,” Townsend says. “We’re looking at initiatives that will recreate the entire streetscape.”

But when it comes to being “pedestrian friendly,” Richmond has a long way to go. In the Aberdeen Centre, the most upscale of the malls along No. 3 Road, a driver of a small car finds that many of the “small car only” parking stalls are bursting with oversize SUVs. “It’s a cultural thing,” laments Danny Leung, Aberdeen Centre developer and manager for the Fairchild Group, of the mostly Asian mall clientele.

In Richmond, the car rules. Ubiquitous left-turn-only signals give private vehicles priority; automatic pedestrian signals are few and far between.

This may be one reason why Aberdeen Centre hasn’t attracted the mainstream customer base that the owner of the \$100-million complex, opened two years ago, so covets. In a chic Hong Kong-style cafe, which is one of seven restaurants in the mall, Fairchild chairman and CEO Thomas Fung concedes that Aberdeen Centre, while popular with Asian shoppers, isn’t doing the level of business he wants.

To address this problem, the youthful, hands-on executive has been on an Italian fashion shopping spree. He’s stocking his three Italian-product stores—aR Fashion, Ozone and Itzy Bitzy Teenie—with items ranging from high-end Versace to cheap Naples-made labels for teenagers. Fung hopes these stores will “bring the mall to another level.” He also plans to franchise these busi-

nesses to Japan and other countries.

ABERDEEN CENTRE’S big success story is Daiso, an upscale Japanese “dollar”-style store that sells everything for a toonie—proof that a bargain is everything here.

North and south from Aberdeen Centre, Asian malls morph into more malls: they include Yaohan Centre, President Plaza, Parker Place, Central Square and Empire Square.

Those at the lower end suggest sweatshop-filled Guangzhou. Others are a little like Tokyo’s hyper-commercial Shinjuku district. Hole-in-the-wall clothing stores stock styles popular in Asian cities. Chinese imports—videos, watches, jewelry; electronic equipment and gadgets—appear to have arrived by the container load.

All have food courts. And sandwiched in and among the malls are as many as 200 restaurants, some with enviable reputations, serving a wide range of Asian and Western fare.

This exotic atmosphere—and lively crush of a predominantly Chinese-speaking crowd—delivers a near-overseas experience. But is it too Asian for your average outsider?

Tourism Richmond is putting a positive spin on reality by promoting the malls and restaurants—collectively dubbed the Golden Village—as an “authentic experience.”

Says Leung optimistically of his Aberdeen Centre: “If you have an open mind, and want to mingle and see what others are doing, this is the place. We’ll be in the leadership in bringing in the mainstream shopper.”

The problems of the Asian malls in attracting non-Asian shoppers mirrors some of the challenges the city has in integrating a diverse population. But locals say they are working hard at cultural harmony.

Balwant Sanghera lives in a large house with an imposing entrance, near No. 5 Road and Cambie Avenue in less glamorous East Richmond. Since moving here 15 years ago, the retired educator has devoted himself to improving relationships between Richmond’s ethnic groups. While a tiny granddaughter peaks through the railing of an upper-storey hallway, Sanghera talks about the efforts of committees made up of volunteers like him to make Richmond what he considers a model multicultural community.

With encouragement from city officials, the sizeable Chinese-speaking business community has become more inclusive, he says. And thanks to a 200-member, multi-lingual RCMP force, once high-profile problems related to drugs and road-racing have been brought under

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Increasing development means loss of agricultural land

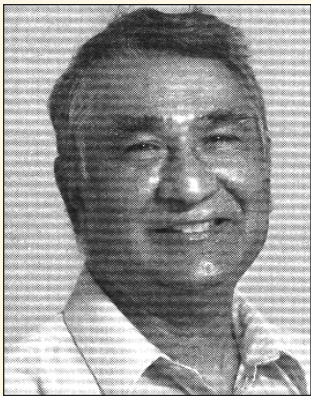
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control, Sanghera believes.
He admits his own Richmond Indo-Canadian community of about 15,000 has not been immune to regional gang violence. Richmond has been the scene of widely publicized gang-related assaults and murders, but Sanghera sees progress. "We're urging the Indo-Canadian community to reach out to others," he says. "It's happening. The younger generations are more open and accepting."

IF THE MALLS ARE BIG in Richmond, the airport is bigger. Vancouver International Airport, which employs 26,000 (with more jobs to come), has a big economic impact and lots of clout in Richmond.

The deafening noise from overhead aircraft is here to stay. Indeed, the number of flights will only increase, reports senior city planner Terry Crowe. Today, planes take off one at a time. In the future, he says, they'll depart in pairs—up and over central Richmond, then divert simultaneously north or southward.

Working with the airport authority and Transport Canada, Richmond has developed an aircraft noise policy based on a set of "contours" describing varying levels of aircraft noise throughout the city.

Armed with this study, the city



Balwant Sanghera: "We're urging the Indo-Canadian community to reach out to others."

buckled the advice of Transport Canada, and declared that residential towers built to the highest noise-mitigation standards—including air circulation systems that allow a structure to be sealed, heavy insulation and multi-pane windows—can be constructed in noise-intense pockets, primarily the city centre. If it works, says Crowe, it will be "a model example of living in proximity to a major airport."

Early condo buyers don't seem deterred. A 124-unit luxury com-

plex, built by the Fairchild Group on its Aberdeen Centre site, is nearly sold out.

All the new development in Richmond has to come from somewhere. Richmond is made up of 17 islands. The second largest is Sea Island, a former dairy farming area gradually consumed by the airport. The main landmass is Lulu Island.

Encircled by the Fraser River, Lulu Island was originally a shrubby delta on which Musqueam natives hunted and fished. From the 1860s, Europeans diked its perimeters and farmed its rich alluvial soils. Today, about 40 per cent of the city, mainly in south and east Lulu Island, remains in the provincial Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR). But pressure to remove more of the farmland is intense.

Since 1974, when the ALR was formed, Richmond has lost almost 11 per cent of its land reserve. Two years ago, cranberry farm owner Peter Dhillon persuaded Richmond council to permit the removal of several of his farm properties totalling 2.5 hectares. Dhillon argued the plots were no longer viable for farming because of their small size and isolation from other farms. He claimed their proximity to a local school prevented him from spraying pesticide (though at least one critic



An artist's rendition shows the new Olympic speed-skating oval and surrounding waterfront park.

said manual spraying would have avoided the problem).

He subsequently sold the land for industrial uses for \$2.5 million. An additional three hectares he owned were removed in 1995 for a golf centre, of which he is president.

A prominent businessman who sits on several major boards, including the airport, Dhillon went on to head an Agricultural Land Commission regional panel that recently approved removal of almost 200 hectares from the ALR near Abbotsford.

He is also a member of Richmond's agricultural committee. When asked if this might be inappropriate, a city official said only that Dhillon is a "major land-owner." Dhillon did not respond to a request for comment.

Richmond council has already given tacit approval for the removal of the 55-hectare Garden City lands in central Richmond for mixed-use development. A larger section of central Richmond, in the ALR but not farmed, faces similar pressure.

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cover

City low and dry, thanks to regular dike maintenance

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Along No. 5 Road, west of Highway 99, the city imposed a “backlands policy” to allow construction of large religious institutions along the route. The caveat for building on farmland was that some of the remaining property was to be farmed. So are the temples and churches along what Sanghera calls “the highway to heaven” complying? “Some are, some aren’t,” says Crowe. Richmond has not enforced the farming policy and the problem has continued for years.

Requests or demands to the city from developers and property owners to up-zone properties that border on agricultural land continue, as do similar requests from owners who believe that their single-family property is suitable for multi-family construction. Crowe says his phone rings off the hook.

WITH AN AVERAGE elevation of one metre above sea level—and large swaths below—Richmond is permanently threatened by water. Floods swept across it in 1884, 1905 and 1948. Today the city spends \$250,000 annually on maintaining a 48-kilometre perimeter dike system—one it insists can withstand the most severe storm.

The gradual silting up of the South Arm of the Fraser River, resulting in higher water levels, are a major worry. Local and federal authorities continue to differ over which jurisdiction is responsible for expensive dredging.

Another possibility is that a rare surge on the upper Fraser could drive water over East Richmond into the residential neighbourhoods. Richmond is considering building a mid-island dike alongside the already elevated Highway 99 or

City wins gold with waterfront Olympic legacy

RICHMOND'S OLYMPIC speed-skating oval—snatched in the nick of time from Burnaby Mountain—will open in 2008 on the Middle Arm of the Fraser River. The \$155-million facility will be part of 29-acre waterfront park on the edge of the city centre.

When the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee (VANOC) announced last year that the major sports facility would not be built at Simon Fraser University, as long expected, but in Richmond, the university and Burnaby Mayor Derek Corrigan were furious.

VANOC CEO John Furlong said the decision to switch the venue's location to Richmond came down to more space and less cost (Richmond's River Rock casino will toss \$50 million into the oval pot). Newspaper commentators accused Richmond and VANOC of tactics ranging from insider finagling to a full-fledged “commando raid.”

VANOC backer Phil Hochstein, director of the Independent Contractors and Businesses Association, pegged Richmond a wily competitor: “The Olympics is all about competition, and this was the first true gold medal performance.”

A City of Richmond brochure suggests passengers flying into or out of Vancouver International Airport won't fail to miss this soon-to-be-started river-side complex. However, a wag opposed to a plan to build more than 30 mostly residential buildings in the city centre argued in a letter to a Richmond newspaper that the pilots will be so busy running into these mid-rise towers that no-one will enjoy the sight.

Of course, with buildings rising to a maximum of 147 feet—not to mention piloting and air-traffic control—there will be no major mishaps. But it's evidence that not everyone supports the plan to build most of the homes for more than 32,000 newcomers to Richmond over the next 20 years in what will become a more concentrated inner city.

When the Olympics are over, the oval will be used for a variety of sports, and the complex will include centres for fitness, wellness and sports sciences. There will be a plaza, restaurants and stores. A University of B.C. Rowing Club complex will be located nearby.

And Richmond will have acquired an inner-city waterfront. —Alison Appelbe

further east.

And what about the possibility of a quake-generated tsunami cresting the dikes and turning Richmond into Canada's version of flooded New Orleans? “It won't happen,” insists Townsend. “Vancouver Island will take the brunt.”

Good thing that, because, like New Orleans, Richmond is banking on tourism. Steveston, once Canada's largest fishing port, has retained a village charm. Modest-priced dining along the wharf overlooking Sturgeon Bank is a draw. Attractions include the Gulf of Georgia Cannery and Britannia Heritage Shipyard, both national historic sites.

Nearer Vancouver, the

new \$200-million River Rock complex—with casino, hotel and Vegas-style entertainment—has attracted attention from as far away as Seattle. Another regional magnet is the Riverport sports and entertainment complex, east of Steveston. Add the Golden Village, Richmond Night Market and ultra-ornate Buddhist Temple on Steveston Highway, and you have a growing tourism region.

With 4,500 hotel rooms, Richmond is planning to add a 600,000-square-foot trade and exhibition centre on the Garden City lands. “With its proximity to the airport, Richmond is the gateway to B.C. between Asia and NAF-

TA,” says Tourism Richmond executive director Tracy Lakeman. “A big part of our emphasis will be on Asian trade.” Add the fact that planning is well underway for the deep-water Fraser Port on 240 hectares east of Highway 99, and you have yet another economic engine.

So what is happening to the city of islands? Boosters will say nothing but good. Richmond has come awake as a roaring little dragon. But whether it can, in coming decades, create a liveable inner city, where the noise from aircraft is tolerable and pedestrians take precedence, and the island's environmental integrity is preserved, remains to be seen.