

DEVELOPMENT

Sleepy White Rock, B.C. catches the developer's eye

HADANI DITMARS

WHITE ROCK, B.C. — Special to The Globe and Mail

Published Friday, Jan. 17 2014, 1:25 PM EST

Last updated Wednesday, Aug. 20 2014, 12:09 PM EDT

This sleepy 20,000-person enclave south of Vancouver that began life as a resort area for city folk is becoming a real estate hot spot.

While change comes slowly to this community of mainly elderly retirees, you know something is afoot when the CBC's Kevin O'Leary pronounces it the next big thing. And just at the moment when its brave new experiment in urban-style densification – seemingly at odds with its largely small town feel – is bearing fruit.

In the new “uptown centre” area – a two block radius north of the beach, Miramar Village – two 21- and 19-storey towers by Bosa that achieved rezoning approval in 2008 and were completed in 2010 – was followed by the Avra (Greek for “sea breeze”) – an Epta Properties 17-storey tower that was finished last April.

A handful of similar projects are in the works, including the Saltaire – its first phase, a five-storey wood-framed building, to be followed by a tower.

While this kind of densification may seem mild by Vancouver standards, in White Rock it caused quite a stir, with vociferous community opposition to the first tower, since quelled by amenity contributions and somewhat stringent aesthetic guidelines. In addition to landscaping around towers, the dominant theme of the moment is a sort of benign “West Coast contemporary.”

But with White Rock's traditionally quirky architecture – partly a result of a federal mandarin who planned the town a century ago regardless of its steep topography, plopping down “Elgin” and “Oxford” streets on practically vertical slopes – one can understand the community's fears about creeping gentrification. Still, the signs were there – really as soon as the Hells Angels clubhouse relocated to Langley more than a decade ago.

At present, the beachfront area still looks like a scene from Robin Williams's *Popeye* (actually shot in Malta), and has, in fact, been a cinematic stand-in for a number of Mediterranean locales. But fears that its eccentric mix of art deco, beach shacks and California-inspired architecture along Marine Drive might get

bulldozed are soothed by the fact that because the lots are so narrow and shallow, it's more cost effective for owners to keep running the plethora of fish-and-chip shops and eateries than build new condos.

But with the average 500-square-foot beach shack on an 1,800-square-foot lot going for \$599,000 (basically lot value) and a controversial new condo development just west of restaurant row, some long-time residents are concerned.

“The trick” of balancing new development while keeping White Rock's character intact, says Mayor Wayne Baldwin, “is to rein in multi-family dwellings and protect the single-family areas.” At the same time, he sees the necessity of more development as land values soar and the population increases. The community plan envisions a build out of up to a population of 30,000 by the year 2030, with a 70/30 split, respectively, between multi-family and single-family units, whose current ratio is closer to 50/50.

“We're running out of land,” says Mayor Baldwin, “so we have to build up.”

While areas such as Five Corners – just south of City Hall – saw late 1980s mixed-use development successfully maintained by an active retail sector, it's now the new “uptown centre” area that will bear the brunt of a more intensive densification.

Meanwhile, the market seems to support the push to densify, with Avra 80 per cent sold, says developer Chris Tsakumis of Epta Properties, and 60 per cent of the Sausalito development near the beach already snatched up.

There are many young families here, Mr. Tsakumis says. “White Rock isn't just about retirees and lottery-home winners. It's a real, developing community.”

But the main drivers, he says, are “early empty nesters and Chinese buyers.”

Indeed, the rush to buy property in White Rock and neighbouring South Surrey, says local Sutton Group Realtor Jin Ye, is on par with Richmond's popularity in the late nineties. Mayor Baldwin recalls daily helicopter flights during the past year – Asian buyers circling potential properties. But since White Rock only offers five square kilometres of land, many Asian buyers are choosing neighbouring South Surrey.

The area appeals to them, says Mr. Ye, for many reasons – including the sunny, mild climate (it rains less than in Vancouver), proximity to the airport and the fact that many properties are almost a third of the price of West Side Vancouver real estate. But also primary is the proximity of many excellent schools, including ones with the IB (international baccalaureate) and French immersion programs.

While many of Mr. Ye's clients who bought in the Avra, for instance, are offshore investors, the majority have their families reside in White Rock, while they work in China.

“This is a good place to spend money, not to make it,” observes the Beijing-born Realtor, who has sold

many properties in the \$5-million range to Chinese buyers over the past few years. And, in a way, there is a strange kind of continuity to this phenomenon, as White Rock was originally a vacation spot where families would spend summers, while breadwinners would work in Vancouver and visit on weekends.

Mr. Ye points out a White Rock waterfront lot with a tear down that is currently listed for \$2-million more than it sold for two years ago. New homes with a decidedly modernist bent are going up every month in tony West White Rock, with the likes of a new Olson Kundig house in concrete, glass and stone a sobering contrast to some of the more colourful 1970s and 1980s residences. Clearly, this is a sought after area.

But it's nearby Elgin and Chantrelle Heights in South Surrey that have become de facto Chinese communities. Here, large acreages with colonial gates – once home to self-styled suburban-landed gentry – now house families from Shanghai and Beijing. On 28th street, points out Mr. Ye, during a particularly frenzied month of sales when Realtors' signs dotted most of the landscape, someone put a sold sign on the street sign itself. Real estate installation art or local protest? Hard to know.

As I contemplate the surrounding gigantus that is South Surrey, some 20 times its size and three times its population, I wonder, where will Kevin O'Leary build his house?

Topics:

- [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation](#)
- [West Coast](#)
- [Vancouver, British Columbia](#)
- [Wayne Baldwin](#)
- [California](#)
- [Vancouver Home Sales](#)
- [City of Oxford](#)
- [White Rock](#)