

Blanshard office tower proposal sails through

\$40-million project would be highest building of its kind

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The transformation of the north end of Victoria's downtown is a step further with approval this week to send a proposed 15-storey office building to a public hearing.

Victoria city council gave the \$40-million Blanshard and Fisgard streets project a smooth passage at its committee of the whole meeting.

The few questions were targeted at plans for its mid-block walkway and living walls plans.

Mayor Alan Lowe was the lone nay

vote to send the Gateway Green project to a public hearing.

"In order to get office space, do we have to go this big?" Lowe asked, adding that the building was twice the height of some of its nearby neighbours.

"It may be too big for the site" and he reminded the developer that when the city approved the nearby Hudson project, which has one tower at 24 storeys, it was never intended to set a precedent.

Developer Travis Lee said the additional size is needed for the economics of the office building to work.

"The residential market is so strong that traditional office sites are being converted to residential buildings. The developer can make a quicker and higher return."

Lee gave the council detailed financial analysis, claiming his profit margin on an equivalent sized office building would be significantly less than if he

built a condominium building.

Lee said he voluntarily offered the financial comparison to help council "wrap their minds around why there is not office space being developed... We wanted to show them that to make the economies of scale work there is a certain density needed."

Lee said it was a bit of a leap to do the proforma — the term used for such a financial analysis — as the city doesn't have a policy demanding it. "It is something you don't want to have scrutinized by someone who doesn't have the background. It is like having your personal information disclosed.

"I don't know if we would do it on every project... But it is the only one that we are working on right now that reaches a little further than historically what we have done."

The city has been warned by a con-

sultant that it will run out of commercial development space in as little as 10 years. Another report indicated that downtown's share of office development is declining as the suburbs snag an increasing proportion of that business.

The Coriolis Consulting Corp. report released this year advised the city it needed to come up with policies within five years to secure its share of growth.

If the Gateway Green project is approved, it will be the tallest office building in the city at 57 metres.

Major developments, including the Hudson, are in various stages of planning in the three or four blocks of that area.

Lee said The Hudson project, being developed by Townline over three phases, will be the centrepiece for the area.

The revitalization effort, including the former Bay building, was the catalyst to his company being interested in the area.

Lee said they've been looking for a suitable site in the area for several years after Mayor Lowe announced that development of the north end of downtown was a priority for the city.

The Gateway Green building, being designed by Charles Kierulf of de Hoog & Kierulf Architects, will have 13,375 square feet of mostly class A office space with some retail on the ground floor.

It is to have 143 underground parking spots and 42 bicycle spaces.

It has been favourably received by neighbourhood associations with the only significant concern being around security of the mid block walkway.

Thomas Guerrero, chairman of the North Park Neighbourhood Association, said he wants assurances that the walkway will not become an area for illegal drug users to congregate.



The area around Blanshard Street at Pandora Avenue would look like this if the Gateway Green project goes ahead. The Gateway Green building is shown on left side of the street, behind an existing apartment building.

de Hoog & Kierulf Architects