

2300 Kingsway (at Nanaimo Street) – “The Hills”
Development Application Number DE412217

Response by Joseph Jones
August 8, 2008

Introduction

Preparing this response has been personally difficult. It could have been a better response with more information and a more reasonable time frame. I happened to have out-of-town trips planned for July 1-31 and August 8-12. (The latter, a granddaughter’s first birthday, was arranged to allow presence at the inconvenient August 7 open house.) Given a deadline of August 11, much of this had to be written earlier in August, before the open house.

The entire project would be better if it showed more respect for the surrounding community and real desire for ongoing consultation. A superficial show of ad hoc support at the 2006 rezoning hearing was engineered by the then-developer using staff connected with the Eldorado site and a few immediate neighbors desperate to eliminate nuisances of the existing bar and motel (noise, drunkenness, prostitution, etc.). The inadequate process, in no way geared to the surrounding working-class immigrant neighborhood, has done a great deal to spark distrust of city planning in the wider Norquay area. The apparent contrast with community involvement in the planning for King Edward Village is striking (notably the provision of a major grocery store for that community in return for the addition of just one storey to a much shorter tower).

Four major concerns about the specifics of the proposed development deserve highlight at the outset:

1. As a harbinger of “EcoDensity,” 2300 Kingsway seems to inject density into Norquay without providing the “eco.” A lengthy timeline and a major “redrawing” should not facilitate avoidance of **current green standards**. Such a major development should be a building for the future, not a second developer going cheap on a flipped project. Nor should environmental quality be minimized for an East Vancouver that has already accommodated far more than its share of municipal density.
2. Deferring a portion of the site to future development as a “second phase” has the appearance of a medium-term ploy to increase density without providing corresponding amenity. Any later approval of a second phase should restrict the developer to the stated rezoning remainder (currently given as 7 storeys and 66,423 sq ft). Subsequent conversion of a village green and community garden into this building will not foster good public relations with either residents of phase one or the surrounding community. The developer’s interests should not be allowed to impose a second extended period of dirt, noise, traffic, and hazard on the neighborhood (and particularly on the children in the daycare). These two considerations should lead to a requirement for whatever development takes place to occur in a **single phase** (like King Edward Village).

3. **Setbacks along Kingsway** of four to five feet seem inadequate for such massive development. A 24 storey tower and a stretch of 7 storey building present a wall to Kingsway and will make pedestrians feel like ants. A sidewalk space already disproportionate to the width of the street will seem even worse. City planners have proposed a Norquay Village along Kingsway. If this is the first embodiment of that vision, the appropriate phrase will be Norquay Canyon.
4. **The project appears to have an amenity deficit.** Thirty-seven daycare spaces have an invisible private quality that most of the surrounding community will never experience. Even if there is balance on technical grounds, community perception will be: much taken for little given. What rezoning “process” there was with the community in 2006 included a definite promise of a major grocery store for the neighborhood – the only general public benefit. Informal information channels now indicate that the major tenant will be Shoppers Drug Mart. If true, this offers much less benefit to a community already accustomed to having a walkable London Drugs at 41st and Victoria.

Timeline

A fully considered written response to this development application is impaired by a “process” that has

- Selected a period of six weeks during peak summer vacation July-August
- Presented only a fluid document subject to ongoing changes
- Extended certain dates for the developer following non-support from the Urban Design Panel on July 2, 2008, yet at the same time, rigidly adhered to scheduled open houses of July 17, 2008 and August 7, 2008 and a deadline of August 11, 2008 for community response

Possible Lack of Proper Scope for Notification

It appears that written notification has been provided only to a limited portion of the proposed “Norquay Village” area (in documents dated June 26, 2008 and July 29, 2008). If the city planning notion of a “village” is to have any validity, all residents of that proposed area should have been informed about this development proposal.

Inadequate and Untimely Information

Apart from the two letters of notification, mailed information has been reduced in size to illegibility. Even online pdfs blur as they scale up. An honest attempt to communicate information to the neighborhood would use the same print design quality that the developer will put into sales promotion.

As of June 27, 2008, available information was evidently incomplete (e.g., square footage for the portion of the site set aside for future development) and inconsistent in detail (e.g., calculation of square footage for Commercial Retail Units). The July 29, 2008 notice involves further changes. Proper response to such a fluid document is difficult.

Lack of Planning Coordination

This planning has no apparent coordination with the proposed development of a Norquay Village Neighbourhood Centre. No community group has yet been formed to consider the “Kingsway Rezoning Area” that this development should spearhead.

This planning has had no integration whatsoever with the existing neighborhood community planning groups, the Renfrew-Collingwood CityPlan Committee and the Kensington-Cedar Cottage CityPlan Committee. (2300 Kingsway is on the boundary and the proposed “Norquay Village” spans that boundary.)

Tall Towers an Inappropriate Building Form

As several planning experts remarked at Vancouver City Council’s seven spring 2008 special meetings on EcoDensity, density does not require tall towers. Anything more than five or six stories (which still allows for eye contact and conversation with ground level)

- Violates human scale
- Provides an alienating experience for pedestrians (especially with little set-back)
- Fosters drive-to cocooning and increases the sense of a looming gated community
- Will never mesh well with the existing neighborhood
- Is inherently less energy-efficient for heating and cooling
- Is more exposed to street noise
- Subjects tenants to greater risk in event of infrastructure failures such as electrical outage and elevator breakdown
- Takes away more neighborhood sunshine so a handful can have “a view” and look down on their neighbors

The original 2006 design sought approval for 18 storeys on a site less appropriate [because lacking significant street separation from the surrounding neighborhood south of Kingsway] than the one occupied by King Edward Village (with a maximum of 17 storeys). At city planner suggestion 18 was upped to 22 with no community input. The developer now looks for 24. This planting of a lone tower appears to be part of a larger intention to blockbust every neighborhood in Vancouver through spot rezoning of “special sites,” and in this instance to establish Metrotown II along Kingsway with little regard for the surrounding neighborhood (other than to rezone away its greenery).

Kingsway is and seems likely to remain a major truck route. This appears to preclude taking street space for sidewalk expansion (which would enhance the streetscape much more than skinny concrete planters installed within the existing median). If this is the case, city planner talk

of a walkable village seems dubious. As density comes to the area, Norquay would prefer a Paris boulevard to a Los Angeles highway.

When Does “Redrawing” Become a Different Plan?

An extensive revision – essentially a new project that amounts to far more than “redrawing” – is being proposed on a rezoning application made two and a half years ago. The developer seems to be seeking to benefit from in-process application status to avoid new green building requirements, thus bringing a cheaper building to market without long-range concern for the future of the neighborhood and the city. The revised proposal differs hugely from the one taken before City Council for rezoning in 2006.

Density Without Corresponding Amenity?

The developer now proposes to take more out of the neighborhood and give back less. (King Edward Village, with a tower maximum of 17 storeys, provided that area with two visible amenities for the general public: a large public library and a major grocery store.) If a “second phase” is permitted at 2300 Kingsway, it should not entail an increase in density. The original determination of amenity involved little neighborhood input and involved specific promises that included a major grocery store. According to *Major Projects Inventory 07-04* (Dec. 2007) from British Columbia’s Ministry of Economic Development, the development was to provide “a SaveOn Foods grocery store” (p. 48). This significant promise to the neighborhood appears to have evaporated.

Disrespect for Kingsway Streetscape

With setbacks from the Kingsway sidewalk of 4’11” for the corner tower of 149,881 sq ft and 3’11” for the seven-storey building of 90,965 sq ft to the east, the Kingsway pedestrian streetscape promises to be stark and overwhelming – anything but a “village” atmosphere. Increased setbacks would show more respect for the neighborhood. A few trees and awnings are not enough. Green space and a possibly more human scale seem to be reserved mostly for the interior of a drive-to vertical gated community.

Location and Nature of Daycare Facility

The only true amenity is a daycare that may be used as a selling point by the developer – and if not properly administered, disproportionately serve the development itself. With the relocation of the daycare facility to ground level with an adjoining play space, the single-purpose nature of that amenity should be reconsidered. This facility could provide a valuable gathering space for the entire community outside of limited daycare hours. 2300 Kingsway should provide clear general benefit to the immediately surrounding community.

Lack of Regard for Phasing Impacts

The proposed second phase (not a part of the original rezoning proposal) would subject present neighborhood residents and occupants of the new development to the extensive dirt, noise, traffic, and hazard of two major projects, not one. (King Edward Village was built all at once on a better-suited site and provided more and more evident amenities for the entire neighborhood.) With a daycare and outdoor play space immediately adjacent, safety concerns should not be sacrificed to developer convenience. Young children would be exposed to a prolonged period of construction noise, airborne pollutants (dust, fumes, chemical offgassing, etc.), increased traffic hazard, and industrial accident potential. With 284 dwelling units proposed for phase one, and 73 deferred to phase two, surely the ratio of what remains undeveloped cannot justify the human costs of a second phase.

Laneway Orientation to the Motorized Vehicle

An interior laneway that provides access to 511 parking stalls (residential, commercial, daycare) demonstrates an orientation to the automobile that may make the interior of the development even less attractive to pedestrians than the Kingsway sidewalk will be. The turning spaces for large retail delivery trucks in the narrow laneway should be a serious concern. This kind of development is supposed to herald the walkability and livability of “Norquay Village”?

Further Perceptions from the August 7, 2008 Open House

The developer’s easelboard on sustainability seemed very soft in what was offered. Consider only that two of the five items listed are temporary (community garden, fruit trees in community garden), to disappear with a phase two.

The developer’s easelboard on social engagement was clearly oriented toward inhabitants of the vertical gated community to be developed, not to the existing surrounding community. Labels for a “village green” and a “community garden” obfuscate the intended use. More honest would be: “the Hills temporary spot of lawn” and “the Hills temporary garden patches.”

* * *

Appendix for Those Less Familiar With Context and History

The Situation

In a letter of June 26, 2008, City of Vancouver, Community Services Group, Development Services notified by mail selected “neighbours” of 2300 Kingsway that a Development Application was pending. Subsequent to “non-support” of the application by the Urban Design

Panel on July 2, 2008, a second letter rescheduled the Development Permit Board meeting from September 22, 2008 to October 6, 2008, with no corresponding extension of the August 11 deadline for written comment from the community. (The materials provided in those letters can be found at <http://vancouver.ca/devapps> in separate pdf files under the heading “2300 Kingsway – DE412217”).

Background

On January 24, 2006 City Council rezoned a two-acre site, half of it previously RS-1 single family, and granted the developer-applicant a great increase in density in return for the provision of 37 daycare spaces (an amenity almost invisible to the surrounding community) and promise of a major grocery store for the neighborhood. That rezoning was for a maximum of 297 dwelling units, a density of 3.6 FSR, and a maximum building height of 22 storeys. (FSR – Floor Space Ratio – is the ratio of built square feet to square feet of land occupied. The 2300 Kingsway site occupies 87,335 sq ft of land.)

The developer that obtained the 2006 rezoning has transferred the project to another developer. The new developer proposes 284 dwelling units and 24,993 sq ft of retail (total 247,983 sq ft of floor space) on about three-quarters of the rezoned land, with the remaining one-quarter to be used later in “a new and separate development permit application” presently said to be for a 7 storey building with 73 dwelling units. How the 297 units approved in the 2006 rezoning have now become 357 is not at all clear. The 22 storey tower is now proposed to be 24 storeys. An earlier major promise of a much-needed grocery store to serve the neighborhood seems to have evaporated now that the rezoning has gone past City Council.