

THE SKYLINE'S THE LIMIT IN NANAIMO

On June 7, 2008, the most significant building project in Nanaimo's recent history opened for business.

While its \$75-million price tag may have polarized public opinion, the Port of Nanaimo Centre (PoNC) is perhaps better appreciated when examining its subliminal catalytic effect on the city. The impressive complex appears to have injected a new level of confidence into Nanaimo to forge ahead with development.

"Whether you're for or against it, it's a magnificent project that seems to have created a lot of momentum, one consequence being that developers who might have viewed us as lacking direction or political will are now taking the city a lot more seriously," says Dave Pady, a planning assistant for the City of Nanaimo.

Housing the Vancouver Island Conference Centre and Nanaimo District Museum, the PoNC dominates Commercial Street in a downtown core subject to long-term plans for revitalization. There is development underway all over the city, but several downtown projects have stolen all the headlines.

At the water's edge on Front Street, the Cape Group's Pacifica is just one major residential building set to transform Nanaimo's modest skyline. Nearing completion and pre-selling fast, the stunning 169-unit edifice has been four years in construction. Offering spectacular ocean and mountain views, Pacifica will undeniably be one of the most enviable addresses in all of coastal B.C.

Practically next door, multi-award-winning local developers InSight have proposed SeaWalk, a 24-storey, 82-suite residential tower of high-end condominiums scheduled for completion by the end of 2010. Expectations for this development are high, a fact mirrored by intense pre-registration interest.

Already occupied is architect Roger Kemble's



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Vivo in the Old City Quarter. A residential building with a frontage including five commercial units, it is sold as presenting the potential for a live/work situation, whereby buyers with a service or product to offer could trade in the same building they dwell. A born and bred Nanaimoite passionate about his city's progression, Pady embraces such cosmopolitan municipal development from both personal and professional perspectives.

"Vivo's a four-storey, multi-family condo building with an internal courtyard and really nice landscaping plan," he says. "It's a very attractive mix of traditional and contemporary architecture and, most importantly, it gets a lot of people living in the downtown area again."

This last comment illustrates the crux at the heart of downtown development plans. "It's important — absolutely crucial — that we get a living, breathing social fabric downtown," Pady states emphatically. "The more people there are living and milling about down there, the more demand there obviously will be for services."

Another important project Pady is keen to highlight is the four-storey Studio NA at 99 Chapel Street, offering 72 units in the heart of downtown's shopping, dining, and nightlife area. Completion is

scheduled for the end of 2009 and presales have been frenzied — even in this economic climate.

In respect of said climate, it may appear that the downturn has had little impact on Nanaimo's upward mobility. "Development permit applications have certainly slowed down," Pady says, "and it seems like major single-family subdivisions have taken quite a hit. But there are still plenty of smaller subdivisions of less risk. As for what's already in-stream, many of these projects have, of course, taken quite a while to get in the ground, so much of what we're seeing being built now had its financing in place well before this economic shift."

Regardless of the economic climate, First Capital Realty has submitted plans for a redevelopment of Port Place Mall, a move that seems to typify the spring in Nanaimo's development step since the PoNC was launched. A multi-phase project of some ambition, its aims include the creation of two traffic corridors and the construction of a 26-storey condo tower in the final phase. Pady welcomes the proposal, seeing it as reflective of civic confidence. "There is incredible optimism. And Nanaimo is big enough in human spirit that it can float through these difficult economic times and emerge relatively unscathed." ■