

GOLDSTREAMNEWS

Fight for the forest

By Edward (Ted) Hill - Goldstream News Gazette - December 05, 2007

Towering above the forest floor, volunteers on wooden platforms stand watch for the machinery that will eventually start clearing land for the Spencer Road Interchange.

At least half a dozen tree-sit platforms are salted through the forest between Leigh Road and the Trans-Canada Highway, in what activists say are strategic locations to maximize problems for breaking ground on the project, due to roll forward this month.

Since the camp and tree-sit began last spring, activist Carl Stephens, 24, says they have tied treetops together to make tree falling too dangerous.

It's unlikely anyone of the dozen-or-so people at the camp knows where all the lashed trees are, said Stephens, who grew up in Langford and has been at the camp since the summer.

"Many trees are lashed together at the top. We've been doing it for a while," Stephens said. "It's kind of a booby trap but we'll let them know that they are there. There will be a sign saying trees are lashed together."

Sitters crewing sky-high platforms and bound trees are part of an effort to halt or reroute the \$32-million Spencer interchange, which would see Leigh Road extended as an overpass across the TCH.

Except for \$4.9 million from the Ministry of Transportation, Langford has funded the interchange through local developers. Bear Mountain is paying about 55 per cent.

At issue near Leigh Road is local ecology such as Spencer's Pond and a limestone cave under the forest.

Langford planners have routed the interchange to avoid both the pond and the cave, but the activists, among others, would like the forest to remain intact.

An ecological assessment by Golder Associates says the interchange won't directly impact rare or endangered plant species. A December 2006 archeological assessment, also by Golder, says no archeological artifacts were found in the area, although it suggested the cave could have cultural significance to First Nations communities.

The reports have done little to sway people from occupying the trees and forest. When and if Langford gets a court injunction to expel the camp, Stephens said the platforms will be crewed for as long as resupply is possible.

A platform on a tripod has also been rigged above the cave, and the cave itself will be crewed by a volunteer. Each location has about two weeks worth of food, he said.

"We've picked trees in the way to getting in here. Strategic places to block machinery," he said. "Until they untie all the trees and remove the platforms, it's not safe (to work)."

Stephens said an injunction will trigger a nonviolent blockade of the forest from a network of people around Greater Victoria. A protest rally is scheduled at Langford City Hall this Saturday.

Another forest camper named Alex, who declined to give his full name, said many of the activists will passively resist in the trees, but others will arrive to stage a nonviolent protest and to document any contractor and police actions.

From the amount of food and supplies donated daily, he said the protest and tree-sit has ample public support from people in Langford and Greater Victoria.

"I see us as the last line of defence," Alex said. "We are prepared not to leave and we are preparing not to leave until there is further public discourse."

Langford administrator Rob Buchan said the interchange ground breaking still has no firm date, and that it might not happen in December. Applying for a court injunction to remove the camp is "entirely a possibility," he said.

The interchange open house in late October generated about 50 comment sheets, with two-thirds of respondents in favour, Buchan said. Of those against, about half weren't Langford residents, he added.

Protesters in the forest or not, Buchan said Langford isn't deviating from its process or planning.

"We are carrying on with our due diligence and trying to do a job for the people that council is serving."