

## **Spencer Road Interchange ~ 2007 Newsmaker of the Year Interchange interrupted**

By Rick Stiebel –  
Goldstream News Gazette - January 02, 2008

Seen as needed infrastructure for a growing region or a blight on local ecosystems, the polarizing Spencer Road Interchange in Langford is the Gazette's newsmaker of the year for 2007 — a project that will certainly continue to grab headlines well into 2008.

The \$32-million interchange that would eliminate the light at the Trans-Canada Highway and Spencer Road and unite both sides of the city, has been a twinkle in Langford's eye for a decade, but only this year did the pieces come together.

In 2006 the City bought up houses along Leigh Road — a controversial process itself — clearing the way for an overpass through the forest abutting the Trans-Canada Highway. This year the Ministry of Transportation gave Langford's interchange the green light and chipped in \$4.9 million, as was announced in November. The remainder of funding is coming from Langford developers, with about 55 per cent from Bear Mountain. Ground breaking, while expected in December, will likely happen this month.

Early in the year as Langford ramped up preparation for construction, vocal opposition coalesced on the ground and in the trees. In March, the Coalition to Protect Goldstream Watershed announced its presence with a protest on the Trans-Canada. By April a round-the-clock protest camp and tree-sit had come together in the forest off Leigh Road.

Activists have vowed to stop the interchange ground breaking with non-violent civil disobedience, using blockades on the ground and hard-to-arrest tree-sitters high above the forest floor. The activists have also tied tree tops together in a bid to stall tree falling.

"Tree-sits are hard to get rid of," said Ingmar Lee, a coalition spokesperson. "We plan on being here 24/7 whether we're ordered to leave or not."

Lee, who helped organize the successful tree-sit at Cathedral Grove to halt the building of a parking lot, says the interchange is a symbol of building infrastructure to suit cars while ignoring other transportation options, such as commuter rail. The interchange, he said, only encourages car culture, urban sprawl and environmental degradation.

Lee and many activists have linked the interchange as being hand-in-hand with Bear Mountain's build-out, an assertion vehemently denied by Langford Mayor Stew Young.

"The interchange is supported by and required by the residents of Langford and will benefit the region," Young said. "If it isn't done, traffic tie-ups will cause more damage to the environment because you'll have cars idling by fish-bearing streams. It's also good for the economy and improving our community, but I guess you don't have a sense of that when you live in a tree for two years."

Malahat-Juan de Fuca NDP MLA John Horgan and Dr. Keith Martin, Liberal MP for Esquimalt-Juan de Fuca, have both come out in favour of the interchange, while acknowledging the need for more sustainable regional transportation solutions.

"Until the internal combustion engine is obsolete, we need infrastructure to deal with the reality of current pressures," Horgan said. "The interchange and commuter rail are not exclusive of each other."

"Many of us have worked very hard on (the interchange) for a number of years," Martin said. "It's not a vanity project driven by Bear Mountain and Westhills."

Public pressure from local residents such as Rob Bowen, who spent years cataloguing and studying Spencer's Pond, prompted Langford to reroute the interchange to avoid both the pond and a large karst cave.

Environmental and archeological assessments, released in late 2007 and after the October public open house, did little to ease criticisms or worries that rich ecosystems would be sacrificed for vehicle infrastructure.

Lee asserts the archeological study missed many First Nation's cultural artifacts that could be protected under provincial law.

Bowen, who has remained clearly separated from the activist camp, said the environmental study was flawed and failed to look at the area's ecosystem as a whole.

"The interchange will cut a big swath that will sever that biological connectivity," Bowen said.

Langford though is unbowed, arguing the assessments are valid and the interchange will go ahead, protesters or not. Langford administrator Rob Buchan has pointed out two-thirds of people who commented at the open house are in favour and the majority of those against are not from the West Shore.

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

The interchange won't eliminate a traffic light as originally asserted, as a light will be installed at Amy Road and the TCH, while the Sooke Lake Road access will be closed off.

City officials have argued traffic exiting Amy Road will be much lighter than cross-town traffic using the Leigh Road overpass, and that closing the dangerous left hand turn off Sooke Lake Road will save lives.

Most recently, while not yet evicting the protest camp, Langford has turned up the heat. The City has accused protesters of poaching deer and bylaw officers and police have inspected the camp.

On the other hand, on Dec. 21 protesters racked up a small victory after blocking a survey crew from working in the forest.

Last year set the stage for a confrontation that pits Langford's right to manage local transportation infrastructure versus regional traffic problems and the erosion of local forests.

Whether the activists will hold their ground is uncertain, but certainly the fight for the forest is far from finished.