

## Spencer interchange work to start; protests planned

Kim Westad, Times Colonist

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Protesters have maintained their vigil from a tree-top shelter.

Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist

Protesters said they will likely ramp up their actions after learning that construction of the controversial Bear Mountain interchange is to start in January.

"I'm predicting there will be a really vigorous defence of the forest and the habitat," said Zoe Blunt, one of the group of rotating protesters who have been at a camp at the end of Leigh Road since April 11.

They say the interchange on the Trans-Canada Highway near Spencer Road in Langford imposes on the environment, and that proper consultation with the community and environmental specialists hasn't been done. For most of their time at the site, at least one person sits in a platform.

The \$30-million interchange is slated to be complete two years after construction starts, Capital Regional District chairwoman and Langford councillor Denise Blackwell said. Trees will likely be cleared in December.

That's when Blunt anticipates protests to escalate, though she wouldn't say what action would be taken.

"People feel strongly about protecting this area. I think some will risk arrest," she said. "We're looking at every possible option to stop it, to delay it, to send it back to the drawing board and to demand more consultation and actual meaningful dialogue and accommodation of environmental concerns."

After a public meeting this week, Blunt said it's clear to her the interchange is a fait accompli.

"We thought the meeting was about consultation, but it wasn't," Blunt said, after about 150 people attended an open house at the Langford Legion, where information about the interchange was on display.

The interchange is to provide a secondary access to the Bear Mountain golf course and subdivision development and ease congestion on the highway. Private developers are funding about 83 per cent of the interchange.

It is needed, politicians say, because of the growth expected in Colwood and Langford. The two municipalities are projected to grow from 37,000 people to 72,000 in the next 20 years.

Blackwell said environmental studies have been done and the routing of the interchange changed as a result.

She remembers an afternoon in 1993 when councillors walked to Spencer's Pond, near the highway, and said they'd be sure to protect the site.

Tim Stevens, the project manager, said they've worked hard to minimize the impact on everything from a nearby cave to the threatened red-legged frog and sneeze weed that is found in the nearby habitat.

"It's always a challenge, but it's part of the process," Stevens said.

An environmental report has been done and two species-at-risk reports are in draft form. Langford officials like Blackwell, argue that the interchange even has an environmental benefit by reducing the amount of greenhouse gases emitted by cars idling on a congested highway.

Joanne Cowan has lived in Langford for a decade, and attended the meeting to find out as much as she could about the interchange.

"I want to know all the pros and cons. I encourage all people to have their say."

Cowan said she'd prefer people change their driving and transportation habits, rather than building more blacktop.

"There are too many vehicles on the road. I'm in favour of rapid transit, Smart cars and biking."