

Tempers flare at Spencer interchange public forum



Esquimalt First Nation member August Thomas opened the Spencer Interchange community meeting, which saw heated debate on the quality and transparency of the public process.

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Environmentalists, developers find little common ground on proposed \$30-million interchange

“I think this group needs to form a talking circle.”

Esquimalt First Nation dancer August Thomas was probably right when he made that suggestion to no one in particular.

It came at the announcement of a break to allow cooler heads to prevail during a passionate, sometimes stormy community consultation to discuss the Spencer Road interchange.

About 40 people — roughly half of them from Langford — filled the meeting room at the Juan de Fuca Library last Wednesday to wade into what has become one of more contentious projects on the West Shore.

Langford wants to replace the traffic light at Spencer Road and the Trans-Canada Highway with a \$30-million interchange. The funding will come from local property developers, with the majority coming from Bear Mountain.

Ingmar Lee, a spokesperson for the coalition of environmentalists determined to stop the interchange, got the proceedings off to a stormy start when he said the interchange was being built solely for the benefit of Bear Mountain Resort.

The situation heated up when Lee called the process that allowed Bear Mountain to be built “aggressive, sleazy, underhanded.” The interchange has nothing to do with the betterment of Langford, and was more the result of “secret government transactions,” Lee said.

That drew a swift response from Bear Mountain residential project manager Bob Flitton, who asked Lee — a Victoria resident taking part in a tree-sit to stop the interchange — to repeat his name.

Flitton raised the possibility of legal action in the wake of what he considered defamatory comments.

Bear Mountain development manager Les Bjola took a more conciliatory approach.

Although he told Lee they would probably never agree on Bear Mountain, he pointed out that there were 27 public hearings as the project unfolded, the last 14 dealing with the traffic issues and the interchange.

When Lee asked if that information was public, Bjola said all of the documents are on the Internet and available to the public.

The provincial government and the City of Langford chose the option currently proposed because it was the least disruptive.

“We moved the road to save Spencer’s Pond, the cave and Garry oaks,” Bjola said. “And we went through (a similar) process to protect the route around Florence Lake.”

The interchange, which is meant to redefine a regional traffic solution, has little to do with Bear Mountain, Bjola said.

Metchosin resident Frank Mitchell questioned whether Langford “kept everyone in the dark” about transportation needs throughout the zoning and planning stages for Bear Mountain.

Meeting organizer Zoe Blunt pointed out that the City of Langford refused to attend the meeting, despite repeated requests.

City of Langford clerk administrator Rob Buchan said the City is still compiling environmental assessments.

Once that information has been compiled and sufficient design work is completed, Langford will conduct a public process to share the information with the public, Buchan said.

Rob Bowen, one of about 16 homeowners on Leigh Road who sold his property to Langford to make way for the interchange, said he had issues with a lack of transparency during that process.

Bowen said a realtor who did not identify himself as representing the City of Langford made an offer in April 2006 that had to be responded to in five days.

That caused great concern for Bowen and his wife because of the difficulty she encountered contacting him while he was working in the Arctic at the time.

Although Bowen said he didn’t wind up selling until July, he said he felt the process was “surreal,” and pitted neighbour against neighbour to a degree on the small cul-de-sac.

Facilitator Dan Rubin wisely timed a break to let tempers cool before beginning a slideshow by Bowen on Spencer’s Pond.

Bowen’s slides and detailed analysis of the sensitive ecosystems that comprise Spencer’s Pond and the need to protect it drew applause from environmentalists and developers alike.

Once discussion resumed, several people questioned the scope of development at Bear Mountain, with one speaker saying there were enough expensive homes and golf courses in the area.

The community would be better served with more affordable housing, she said.

Malcolm Hall, a citizen representative on Langford's planning and zoning committee, said "Langford bends over backwards" to accommodate environmental concerns.

"It's open not secretive," Hall said, pointing out he couldn't recall seeing anyone complaining about the project at any of the meetings or public hearings for Bear Mountain.

He questioned why people were complaining about Bear Mountain now, instead of during the public process when the zoning was passed.

Colwood resident Sonja Young, one of the few to actually speak about the interchange specifically, said she was "totally against" the interchange.

"The money should be going toward commuter rail," she said.

Bjola pointed out that developers who were funding the interchange were also actively involved in Communities for Commuter Rail, a coalition of groups pushing for commuter service from Duncan to Victoria along the E & N rail line.

Following the meeting, Blunt said it was one of the first times she can recall where developers and environmentalists spoke to each other in a public forum.

"That has to be considered a positive," said Blunt, who plans to schedule more meetings as the interchange proposal moves forward.

"It's also significant that developers felt they couldn't ignore the meeting," Blunt added, referring to at least five developers in attendance. "That indicates people's concerns are being taken seriously."