



“Interchange protest emphasizes concerns about development”

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by Anna Kemp

Langford residents and advocates against the Bear Mountain development rallied at Langford City Hall March 19 to protest the city's plan to build a new interchange.

City planners expect that the new Spencer Road interchange will alleviate traffic congestion at the Millstream interchange and the Trans-Canada/Spencer Road interchange.

According to Acting Mayor Denise Blackwell, the interchange has been part of the area's highway design since at least 1995. “It's just prudent planning. The interchange has been in our plans for a long time and we know we need it to keep traffic flowing.”

Larry Wartels, a spokesperson for the Coalition to Protect Goldstream Watershed, doesn't agree that the new interchange will relieve traffic flow. “It's deceptive to frame it as relieving congestion. . . . This interchange is strictly to help Bear Mountain development to expand.”

According to Wartels, although the City is calling it the “Spencer Road Interchange,” it will not actually be located at Spencer Road. “People hear Spencer Road, which is the last place that traffic backs up before they crawl up the Malahat, and people assume that it will relieve congestion,” he said.

A representative for the City of Langford told the Martlet that the proposed route is still in draft stages and the information is not yet public.

Suzanne Bowen, a resident who was displaced by the planned interchange, is concerned about the environmental damage that may occur with the new interchange and the highway construction that will go along with it. Bowen's house sat at the edge of Spencer's Pond, a unique ecosystem that is home to many plants and animals, including the red-legged frog, a blue-listed species.

“Spencer's Pond is seasonal or vernal, which means that it dries up once a year. At different stages, the pond is important for birds, insects, otters, owls. We have even seen a martin there.”

Bowen believes that proposed highway construction will threaten the pond as well as Langford Lake cave, a nearby cave that is at least 40 metres long.

Getting information about the city's plans can be difficult, according to Bowen. “If you ask the city about their plans, they say they don't know. . . . When we were asked to move, the real estate agent who knocked on the door wouldn't say who wanted to buy our home. It wasn't until three days later that the city decided to disclose that they were the buyers. Everything has been very much behind closed doors.”

Bowen also said that Golder Associates and Seacor Environmental Inc. were involved with an environmental impact assessment of the project. According to Bowen, a report was prepared for Langford City Hall, that she believes should be open to the public. Neither Golder Associates nor Seacor Environmental Inc. responded to Martlet phone messages by press time.

Cheryl Bryce, a land manager for the Songhees Nation with concerns about development, has also found it difficult to get information about development plans from the City of Langford. She had been asking for a copy of the community development plan for over a year before she finally went to the media in May of last year. After public attention was drawn to her requests, they said they'd send it, but they still haven't done so.

“Something of this magnitude should be public information on their website. . . . If they are being up front, they should have no problem putting it on their website.”

Bryce, who has been monitoring environmental degradation as a result of the Bear Mountain development, is concerned about whether appropriate environmental or archaeological assessments are being done for development in the area.

“What the City of Langford or developers say is very contradictory as it relates to the environment or cultural sites,” she said. “I wonder how transparent and accountable this process really is. When you start seeing mud coming down a stream and filling a pond, I wonder how much they are doing.”

Mayor Blackwell said that all required environmental and archaeological assessments have been done or will be done and that if people can't access information, it is because they are still in the design stages.

Nevertheless, she appreciates that people voice their concerns. “It's important that people who have concerns get them out there and come out to Langford to see the plans.”

Blackwell also emphasized the council's commitment to putting commuter rail in place as a way to reduce traffic. A new “ad hoc committee” involving Langford, View Royal, Esquimalt and Victoria, as well as developers and representatives from BC Transit and from the Island Corridor Foundation, has been meeting to discuss commuter rail, she said.

A massive investment in commuter rail is what many opposed to the interchange would prefer to see. “Upscaling the train to make it a viable commuter rail route, in conjunction with more effective and affordable bus services to the municipalities, would take cars off the street,” said Wartels.

Although Wartels points out that many people in the Langford community are employed by large developments such as Bear Mountain, both he and Bowen said that many people in the community have concerns about it.

“More horns were honked in support than fists shaken in anger,² said Bowen about reactions to the March 19 rally.