

Column: Developments a good barometer

By Victoria News

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From where I live, the 84-metre high crane at the Bayview Promontory cuts through the skyline. It's touted as the tallest crane in Victoria's history. I can believe it.

In terms of urban economic activity, cranes dotting the sky can be a big visual indicator of vitality and jobs. The more cranes, the more jobs, the more people spend. And eventually those buildings translate into more property taxes.

I hope the Promontory does well, and also the upcoming crop of big condo projects: Union, Duet, Era and The Sovereign. But even with holes in the ground, anyone who has watched development in Victoria over the past few years won't hold their breath that all these projects will finish as planned.

In 2008, media were invited to take photos of the first concrete foundation and marvel at the giant crane imported from Spain for Robert Quigg's Capella project. The plan was for 650 luxury condos in four towers looming over Victoria from Bear Mountain.

Overlooking the dusty, but busy development site at the time, the obvious question was "who will buy and fill all these condos?" Baby boomers, I was told, wealthy baby boomers from Calgary and Toronto.

At the height of the hubris, that project offered free helicopter rides over the construction site for potential buyers and the media (I politely declined).

Large plywood boards surround that long, quiet construction site today, the dreams long gone of vineyards scattered among gleaming glass towers. Up the road, in the Bear Mountain properties, the skeletal first few floors of the Highlander mark the spectacular rise and ungracious fall of Len Barrie. That project came back to life under new, far less controversial management.

Not far off, the Silkwind tower in Colwood promised 23 storeys with 150 gleaming condos. Instead, the city was left with a big embarrassing hole in the ground, and extra engineering work to make sure the pit didn't erode from under neighbouring townhouses.

Projects well into the construction phase can also die. I sat through long public meetings, as people fretted and worried about traffic that would flood out of Aquattro in Colwood, which was planned for 585 luxury condo and townhouse units in 28 buildings. It managed to build one townhouse row and three condo buildings before going bankrupt.

Last year the many empty unsold (but still luxury) units were being offered for almost half price.

Baby boomers from across Canada didn't empty their life savings in Victoria. But the credit crunch of the Great Recession was blamed for leaving more areas than just the West Shore pockmarked with slow condo sales, idle construction holes and weedy development lots.

Recession aside, many developers just read the tea leaves wrong, got greedy and thought Victoria was New York City.

Projects that did survive tended to be marketed to people who live here – young families looking for a first home, seniors looking to downsize from a house, or young urbanites who can afford a modest condo.

Projects such as Westhills and Kettle Creek Station can keep building through tough times because they offer what people can afford.

Big commercial developments like Uptown and the new Capital City Centre say residential units will come when "market conditions" are right. Could be 10 years from now, could be never.

Over the years, I've become a bit jaded on big developments that promise the world. Few, if any, deliver what they announce in terms of public amenities, and often the time horizons for success are so long that they become

perpetual construction zones.

If Promontory rises 21 stories into the sight line of my home, and they can sell their units, it will be a good economic indicator for the city. If it doesn't, we can add it to the long casualty list of developments in Victoria.

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