

(Final Version)

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Monday 29 March 2010

Dear Britannia Board of Management:

Re: Britannia Centre visioning process (February–June 2010)

This letter raises some concerns about the Britannia Centre visioning process, mainly about the proposal to build housing on the Britannia site, which would almost certainly require a P3 (public-private partnership). There are also some comments about the charette (design workshop) on 6 March, Britannia's online survey, and the Britannia Centre website.

A major source of confusion for me, and probably many Grandview Woodland residents and visitors, is the relationship between the visioning process (known as "Designing Our Future") and the 2007 Britannia Master Plan. When I first heard about the survey and charette, I assumed that they and the visioning process were in service of the Master Plan. However, after attending a meeting of Britannia Board's Planning and Development Committee on 23 March, I came to understand that the 2007 plan is being presented as part of Designing Our Future, and that people are being encouraged to develop their own visions that may or may not fit with the 2007 plan.

The relationship between the visioning process and the 2007 Britannia Master Plan continues to confuse me because I understand that Designing Our Future is being funded with \$60,000 obtained from the City of Vancouver's 2009 Supplementary Capital Budget, and those funds were for "Britannia: Schematic Design" where "The purpose of this project is to develop the facility concept design in preparation for construction and renovation."

The remainder of this letter is organized as follows. Sections 1–4 of this letter are about the visioning process. Section 5 notes the lack of information about either the visioning process or the Master Plan on the Britannia website. Finally, section 6 contains a request to consider the incorporation of geothermal heating and cooling and other environmental features into Designing Our Future and the Master Plan for the Britannia site.

There are appendices containing background information about Britannia Centre (Appendix A) and the Master Plan and Designing Our Future process (Appendix B). Most of the background information is likely well known to Board members but is included as for reference. However, Board members may be interested to learn that the Britannia site is divided into two parcels. One parcel, occupying about a third of the site, is owned by the City of Vancouver; the other parcel is owned by the Vancouver School Board (VSB). See Appendix A for more details.

1 Proposal to Build Housing on the Britannia Site

1.1 Problems and Solutions

Cynthia Low, Executive Director of Britannia Centre, announced at the 1 March 2010 meeting of the Grandview-Woodland Area Council (GWAC) that Britannia was launching a visioning process to imagine the Britannia site in 40–50 years. Such a time horizon meant thinking about the future of the pool and ice rink, which both have a 30-year life expectancy. Those thirty years are about up, so there is a question about whether to refit them, or rebuild them, or use the space they currently occupy for other things.

Among the ideas being considered in the process was building affordable housing on the Britannia site. This immediately generated some discussion, and a number of the attendees at the meeting began to raise concerns about the idea that evolved into an extended discussion with Cynthia over the following week. During this time, Cynthia explained that one of the concerns raised by Britannia Centre clients is the lack of affordable housing in Grandview Woodland, hence the suggestion to build affordable housing on the Britannia site as part of the visioning process.

1.2 Housing Ideas Being Proposed

At the 6 March charette some of the participants were advocating complete redevelopment of the site and using market condos to subsidize the redevelopment at ten condo units to one non-market unit on top of the school buildings and community buildings, as well as strata commercial spaces at grade. A view-corridor study was also proposed to optimize views for taller residential buildings above mixed-use commercial on the site.

Cynthia had mentioned the parking lot on the north side of the Britannia site, to the west of the ice rink, as a possible location for housing. However, discussion at the charette was about not just development of that parking lot, but also development of the gravel playing field to the west of the elementary school in addition to entire site redevelopment.

1.3 Practical Concerns / Troubling Implications

I acknowledge that there is a lack of affordable housing in Grandview Woodland and that it would be desirable for additional affordable housing to be built in the neighbourhood. But proposing and building housing on the Britannia site raises a series of practical concerns and troubling implications which are reported below.

2 Practical Concerns about Building Housing on the Britannia Site

2.1.1 Developers Would Demand a High Ratio of Market to Non-Market Housing

In order to raise the funds to provide affordable housing onsite, there will need to be a significant percentage of market to non-market accommodation in the funding format of a P3 (public-private partnership). The ratio suggested at the charette was a ratio of ten market condos to one unit of non-market housing. The result would be a predominantly privately-owned housing development on a site that is known for its publically-owned community centre, school, and other amenities.

2.1.2 Developers Would Likely Demand a Large Number of Units

In order to support this kind of 10–1 ratio, a private developer would probably need to build a large number of units for the project to be financially viable (in the developer's view). That would mean a development that had a large footprint, or was tall, or both. The north-end parking lot could take a large-footprint building, but such a building would create a "barrier" to entry to the site from the north.

A new tall building on the north side of the site, or anywhere on the site for that matter, would raise a series of problems. First, the views from the Britannia site to the north and west are part of the attraction of the site and a considerable public asset. Any new tall buildings, especially along the edges of the site, would interfere with those views. Once such views are lost, they are effectively lost for good. Britannia Board has the responsibility of keeping those views in the public domain.

The new Arts and Culture building in the Britannia Board's 2007 Master Plan was designed to take advantage of the value of views from the Britannia site. That design included a large room on the fourth floor with big windows, providing views to the north and west. The idea was that the room could be rented out for events, and that a considerable attraction of the room would be its views. A tall building on the north-end parking lot would diminish that view. People would look out over this new building, containing a substantial component of private housing. Is this what users of the top floor would want to see?

Second, if a new building was taller than other existing facilities, then it would become a landmark for anyone viewing Britannia, especially if the building was towards the edge of the Britannia site. If the proposed new Arts and Culture and Information Centre buildings were to go ahead, then they would become landmarks for anyone entering the site from the east or southeast. These building would "signify" Britannia from those viewpoints and would almost certainly be a good thing, signifying that arts and culture, for example, was key to Britannia Centre. If a tall building containing housing was constructed on the north-end parking lot, then that building would become a Britannia landmark from the north and also from some eastern locations. It would be the building that "signified" Britannia from those viewpoints as a housing development.

2.1.3 The City or VSB Would Likely Have to Lease or Sell its Land to Build Housing

If housing and mixed-use commercial were developed onsite, it would be desirable if the City or VSB could retain ownership of the entire site and do the development themselves. It is unlikely that the City or VSB could raise the capital for the project themselves. Of interest in this regard is 1 Kingsway (www.1kingsway.ca) or

<http://vancouver.ca/1kingsway>), which the City began planning in 1996. The 1 Kingsway site was purchased in 2001 and opened in 2009. The site contains 98 units of market (rather than affordable) rental housing and also a community centre, library, and child care centre. The total project budget was \$26.5 million in 2004. The market rental housing, which is managed by Colliers International, was funded from the City's Property Endowment Fund. (Note that a project financed in this way could not go forward if there were market strata condos or commercial involved as part of a P3.)

Almost certainly the only realistic way that housing and mixed-use commercial could be built onsite is under a P3. Under a P3, the City or VSB would sell its land or provide a long term (60–99 year) land lease to developers, and then the two public bodies would lease back parking, school and amenity spaces, or hold them as strata or air parcel lots.

But a problem here is that Britannia becomes a renter or strata owner on what was once its own property, and its control of the land would be surrendered in perpetuity or at minimum for many decades.

2.1.4 A Private Partner Would Have Different Needs and Values from Existing Non-Profit Partners

Any housing and mixed-use commercial project onsite would raise safety and security issues for the students of Britannia Elementary and Secondary School. The site would be much harder to secure with residents and commercial customers coming and going on a site that also needs public access for the schools.

Any housing project would likely contain condos, probably organized as a strata. It is likely that the values of the condo owners would differ from those of the existing non-profit partners (e.g., VSB, Vancouver Public Library). People with homes, especially private homes, are concerned with issues like traffic, noise, views, graffiti, and other matters that might affect their property values and quality of life. Some of these issues overlap with the values of VSB, VPL, etc, but not necessarily all of them.

A second point here is about the relationship of the project's strata to Britannia. The strata would likely want to be informed about happenings and plans for the Britannia site. If housing was built on the north end of the site and there were problems with noise — from say the Secondary School immediately to the south — then the strata might well look to Britannia Board for resolution of those problems. Maybe strata members would start attending (some) Board and subcommittee meetings (e.g., Planning and Environment) if there were topics that had some potential impact on them, in their view.

Finally, if Britannia Centre was making plans for the future of the site then the strata might well insist on being consulted extensively about those plans, and not just in the way Britannia has consulted with people about the Master Plan and is presently consulting in the visioning process. After all, the owners of the market housing would have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on their properties. Imagine, for example, that Britannia wanted to do something major to the ice rink — say retrofit it. Condo owners, especially those on the east side of the proposed building, might well want to have a say about any such project. Such consultation would take time and resources of Britannia staff and Board members.

2.1.5 Would Britannia Centre Lose Parking Spaces for Its Users?

I understand that the plan for housing on the parking lot at the north end of the site is to retain parking for users of the Britannia Centre site. Those in the housing would also require parking spaces. How would the needs of the two sets of vehicle owners be accommodated? If all the parking was underground, then there would be safety concerns for Britannia Centre users returning to their vehicles, especially at night.

An alternative would be to retain parking at grade for Britannia Centre users and build the housing above those parking spaces, with underground parking for those in the housing. But this proposal has problems too. First, it raises the height of the buildings by a storey. Second, an elevator shaft would be required to connect the housing with the underground parking, which would create security concerns at ground level.

2.1.6 Onsite Housing Would Require Rezoning the Britannia Site

Any proposal to change the conditions associated with the site's CD-1 (87) zoning would require initiating a proposal to rezone with the City of Vancouver's Rezoning Centre. Changes that would require a rezoning application are listed in Appendix A.

A rezoning inquiry would first require vetting by City staff before a formal rezoning application was made. The application would require information signs on the site, a mail out to registered property owners approximately two blocks of the site, and probably an open house. The application would be evaluated by City Planning staff, who would write a report analyzing the application. The report would either recommend refusal or referral to a public hearing (a special meeting of Council). Council would decide whether to approve or refuse the rezoning application either at the

hearing or would defer the decision to a regular Council meeting. Planning staff say that the average time required to process applications is six to nine months, though the length of time varies with the complexity of the application and other factors (<http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/planning/landuse5.htm>).

There might be a problem with getting the revised Master Plan onto the 2012–2014 Capital Plan if using the requested funds was dependent upon a successful rezoning application.

2.2 Troubling Implications

A number of implications follow from the “land lift” that would arise from converting a parking lot or playing field into housing (or mixed-use commercial). To put it another way, the value of a square foot of Britannia Centre land used for amenities is far exceeded by its value as housing. This land lift could have several consequences.

2.2.1 Principle of Non-Market Uses of School and Park Board Land Undermined

To allow housing to be built would undermine the principle that VSB and Community Centre land should be retained for programming uses and space for future expansion only. It should be noted that existing school and community centre land is not being used in Vancouver for housing development, though there are a few exceptions. In some instances, the City is including community space within new residential developments as part of their Community Amenity Contribution (CAC). Also, the Mount Pleasant Community Centre was created on City-acquired land with City-owned housing built above the Centre. However, the VSB has a history of selling off school land for condo development and the Provincial government has already engaged in attempts to sell off school sites and only backed off when there was extreme public pressure to not sell the sites for condo redevelopment.

To put housing on the Britannia site would set a precedent and put school and community centre land in Vancouver under condo development pressure. The north parcel of the Britannia site, owned by the City (see Appendix A), has been identified as a prime candidate for development. If one part of that parcel was developed, then pressure would build to sell or lease the rest of that parcel.

2.2.2 Government Might Factor Land Lift from Development to Cut Public Funding

Another concern is that the province could start to factor land lift from development into its funding formulas for schools, community centres, etc. This could be the start of a slippery slope to further reduced budgets and reduced amenity spaces.

2.2.3 Government and Others Might Look to Development to Raise Funds

A further concern is that both government (on the one hand) and cash-starved schools and community centres (on the other) might look to subsidize underfunded programs, pay for operating costs, or fund upgrades by leasing or selling their land for development, and especially the building of a mix of non-market and market housing. The preceding parties might use Britannia as an example to justify the lease or sale of parcels of land that are parking lots or the edges of school playing fields, even entire school sites. This justification would be easier to support (defend) if Britannia Board itself made and supported such a proposal (instead of, say, the proposal being made externally). The argument could be made that of course it's a good idea because look: Britannia Board proposed it for its own site!

2.2.4 Development of Housing on Britannia Site Might Set Precedent for Neighbourhood

Developers of properties in the neighbourhood might be encouraged by the development of housing (and mixed commercial) on the Britannia site to increase the number of rezoning applications and relaxations of existing zoning by-laws in Grandview Woodland.

3 Concerns about Consideration of Onsite Housing in the Public Consultation Process

Visioning processes are meant to be an opportunity for participants to engage in open-minded, creative, unfettered thinking. However, a concern with providing a free rein to such thinking is that practical problems or negative implications may not be considered in that thinking. As a result, the process can produce recommendations that have not been thought through critically.

The online survey and charette both seem to have directed the public to actively consider onsite housing, without consideration of its potential negative impacts. This uncritical direction is seen in questions 16 and 17 of the online survey. Here is Question 16 followed by question 17:

Would you like to see housing built on the Britannia site? (Affordable housing is a critical issue in the neighbourhood. If, for example, we were to provide an underground parking lot in the location of the current parking lot to the north of the secondary school, think how many housing units could be built there!) Please provide your reasons.

17. If housing were built on the Britannia site, what type might it be ... and who would live there?

If housing were built on the Britannia site, what type might it be ... and who would live there?

[List of housing types deleted]

Add your own ideas; our list is just to inspire you.

Similarly, it has been reported that the discussion at the charette was geared toward where development of housing could occur, not if there should be housing on the site in the first place. It was taken as a given that the site would be redeveloped with housing, without explaining the practical problems or implications of doing this to charette participants.

4 Concerns about Videotaping of the 6 March 2010 Charette

Britannia Board decided to videotape the 6 March charette. Video cameras were set up by students at each and every table where discussions were being held. I have been to quite a few consultative planning forums (workshops, charettes, etc) and, apart from one EcoDensity event, none have been videotaped.

I understand that before the charette began, participants were asked whether they minded being videotaped. This put people in the awkward situation of speaking out against what was assumed to be the norm. Even for those for who said nothing at this point, I would have thought that if the objective of the charette was to encourage people to be comfortable and spontaneous (in order to brainstorm, say what was frankly on their minds, etc), then videotaping everything they said and did would not be conducive to that — at least for some.

5 Lack of Visioning and Master Plan Information on the Britannia Centre Website

There is a striking lack of information about the Britannia Centre visioning process or the status of the Master Plan on the Britannia Centre website. Dedicated web addresses would help a great deal. There could be an address called <http://britanniacentre.org/vision.html> where people could find out about the visioning process, upcoming events, and the like. There could also be an address called <http://britanniacentre.org/masterplan.html> where interested parties can go for information about the history of the Master Plan. From looking at these web pages, people should be able to understand what is being proposed for the Britannia site in the near-future (the Master Plan) and in the longer term (the visioning process).

6 Geothermal Heating and Cooling and Other Environmental Features in Future Plans

The Sunset Community Centre, which opened in 2007, has a geothermal system that supplies 40% of the centre's heating and cooling. 1 Kingsway also has a geothermal system. A geothermal system and other environmental features (such as high-efficiency window glazing, radiant cooling, radiant floor heating, light sensors in rooms, and dual-flush toilets) would seem to merit incorporation into plans for the Britannia site for environmental reasons, and probably economic ones too. This should be incorporated into existing building retrofits and in any new construction, but should not override the benefits of retaining the embodied energy of existing buildings where ever possible.

Thank you for your consideration of the concerns I have raised. I hope you will enter this letter into the Britannia consultation process for both “Designing Our Future” and Britannia’s Master Plan and that the letter’s contents will contribute to both of them.

Sincerely,

Dan Fass

Appendix A: Britannia Community Services Centre

Britannia Community Services Centre (hereafter Britannia Centre) is a complex built on a 17 or 18 acre site. The site is almost certainly the largest site in Grandview Woodland owned by a public or private body. Port Metro Vancouver (formerly the Vancouver Fraser Port Authority) owns considerable land along Burrard Inlet, but much of that land is tied up in long-term leases to various entities.

The Britannia Centre complex, which first opened informally in 1974 and officially in June 1976, offers services to people of all ages. There is a public library, seniors' centre, adult learning resource centre, secondary school, teen centre, elementary school, and an onsite childcare centre (plus five centres offsite). There is a swimming pool, ice rink, fitness centre, four gymnasiums, racquetball court, and mat room. There is also a community information centre and meeting rooms.

The Britannia Centre site is zoned CD-1 (87) and is owned partly by the City of Vancouver and partly by the VSB.

With regard to ownership of the site, according to City of Vancouver Real Estate Services, the City of Vancouver owns an L-shaped parcel of land along the north side of the site and the VSB owns the rest. The two parcels are shown in the attached map, which is taken from VanMap, but with property lines widened to improve readability. (A reference to I-2 zoning that appears on VanMap in the northwest of the site appears to be incorrect and has been digitally removed.)



As you can see, the north-end parking, ice rink, and northern ends of the swimming pool complex and Gym C complex are on City of Vancouver property; the rest is VSB land.

A document about CD-1 (87) zoning can be found at the City of Vancouver website ([http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/bylaws/CD-1/CD-1\(087\).PDF](http://vancouver.ca/commsvcs/bylaws/CD-1/CD-1(087).PDF)). This document (By-law No. 4710, amending By-law 3575) came into force in July 1973. Page 3 of the document contains a plan of the site. Page 2 lists three main development restrictions associated with the site. Those are:

The area shown outlined in black on the said plan is rezoned CD-1 and the only uses permitted within the said area and the only uses for which development permits will be issued are:

- schools, gymnasium, swimming pool, ice rink, library, playfields, ancillary recreational facilities and other customary ancillary uses including off-street parking,

Any new development pursuant to this By-law shall not exceed 40 feet in height.

The floor space ratio shall not exceed 0.45 gross.

These restrictions are noted on page B-3 of the August 2007 Master Plan.

Appendix B: The Britannia Master Plan and Designing Our Future Visioning Process

Britannia Centre is run by the Britannia Community Services Centre Society, which was founded in 1974. A volunteer Board of Directors (the Britannia Board) run the Society, which manages the Centre in partnership with people from the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, the Vancouver School Board (VSB), and the Vancouver Public Library (VPL) Board.

In 2004, Britannia Centre obtained funds from the City of Vancouver’s Supplementary Capital Budget to produce a Britannia Facilities Master Plan. A subcommittee of the Britannia Board, the Planning and Development Committee, oversaw the development of the Master Plan. A Community Needs Assessment was conducted in 2005 and DGBK Architects was engaged to produce the Master Plan. After consultations with various interested parties in a process called “Imagine Britannia Beyond Tomorrow,” a report was published in August 2007 called “Imagine Britannia and Beyond ... Facilities Concept: Britannia Community Centre Facilities Master Plan.”

The completed Master Plan envisaged spending \$18 million on improvements to the Britannia Centre site. The improvements were to have included construction of a new four-storey Arts and Culture centre building and a new Information Centre building (housing an Education Centre), and an expansion of the fitness centre, the seniors centre, and teen centre.

The request for \$18 million was submitted to the City of Vancouver with the aim of getting the request onto the City’s 2009–2011 Capital Plan which was debated and passed by Council during the fall of 2008. The request did not make it onto the Capital Plan, but Britannia Centre obtained further funds from the City of Vancouver’s Supplementary Capital Budget in 2009 for “Britannia: Schematic Design” “to develop the facility concept design in preparation for construction and renovation.” The Master Plan continues to be the domain of the Planning and Development Committee of the Britannia Board. I assume that Britannia Centre’s intention is to revise its Master Plan before the creation of the 2012–2014 Capital Plan, to be considered in the fall of 2011, and seek to get the Master Plan on the Capital Plan.

Britannia Board kicked off a visioning process for the Britannia site, known as “Designing Our Future,” with interested parties in February, starting with an online SurveyMonkey.com survey announced on 16 February 2010 (<http://vancouver.ca/parks/cc/britannia/website/somethingishappening.html>), followed by a design charette on 6 March 2010. This visioning process is being conducted with the assistance of UBC School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP). Britannia’s Spring 2010 Guide gives June as the end-date for the visioning process.

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