

Gibsons Landing Harbour Plan

What's all the fuss about?

Recognized as the “Jewel of the Community,” the Gibsons Landing harbour and area has been the subject of numerous planning exercises. To date, however, the Town has never adopted a Harbour Plan that defines specific limitations and possibilities for development in this area and amended it into their Official Community Plan (OCP).

Development pressure has escalated over the years and by 2006 it had reached the point where key stakeholders in the harbour area wanted clear-cut answers. The Gibsons Library and the Sunshine Coast Maritime Museum needed assurances about use and development of Town assets and the Gibsons Marina's lease renewal was looming on the horizon.

Three major development projects known as Shoal Bay (SB), Tugboat Landing Marina (TLM), and the Gibsons Landing Harbour Authority (GLHA) Expansion Plan emerged in rapid succession. In the absence of a Harbour Plan, the Town was concerned about the potential collective impacts of these proposals, so they hired Coriolis Consulting Corp. to consider options for how to proceed with these projects. In their report entitled “Approvals Process for Three Major Development Proposals in Gibsons Landing,”

Coriolis said that while they were “hesitant to suggest yet more planning”... the lack of a plan would “create tension in the community.”

Shoal Bay. When the “four storey” (54-foot tall) 109-unit condominium complex known as Shoal Bay came to public hearing in 2008, citizens argued that the project was not in accordance with the OCP on a multitude of issues. When 75% of residents told Council of the day that they were *not* willing to sacrifice their small town character for the purported economic benefits offered by development of this scale, the overwhelmingly negative response sparked major controversy. The seeds of dissent that sprouted over this project caused rifts between community interest groups that persist to this day.

GLHA. At the same time, the Gibsons Landing Harbour Authority was seeking grants for expansion. To some, the Authority seemed intent on moving forward without further public consultation despite criticism that they had not sufficiently consulted the public in the first place.

Tugboat Landing Marina. In addition, the proposition of an eight-storey hotel and convention centre to replace the boat haul-out facility on the Hyak Marine site directly adjacent to Winegarden Waterfront Park in the harbour was apparently dismissed by the planning department because the magnitude of such a project would be in complete contravention of the Town of Gibsons Official Community Plan. However, the proponent remained intent on seeing his vision realized. After undergoing a number of revisions, the Tugboat Landing Marina proposal has re-surfaced in the form of a 70,000-square-foot “four-storey” (height unspecified) 120-room hotel and spa with a 100+/- seat conference facility, 33 resort condo units, related cafe/restaurant services, and “underground” parking as well as increased and upgraded facilities on the water. The building footprint shown on the latest plan covers most of the land from the southern edge of Winegarden Park across Winn Road to the boundary of the properties across the street from the little post office. This project is slated to come forward in 2012.

Just as Coriolis predicted, the lack of a definitive plan had entangled citizens in divisive arguments and eroded the social fabric of the community.

A Paradigm Shift?

Gibsons' OCP was built on a theme of "maintaining the small town atmosphere of Gibsons," so these major projects had residents asking some hard questions about the future of their town and the potential of "a paradigm shift," as described by then-Councillor Bob Curry, if these projects were to move forward. The Town recognized that in the absence of an area plan not only would divisive scenarios in the community repeat themselves when TLM, the next SB application, and the GLHA expansion came back to the table, but prospective developers would still be unsure about what development in Gibsons *can* look like. No one wanted potential developers spending huge amounts of money only to be shut down at the eleventh hour by concerned citizens, and citizens were tired of having to fight to protect their small town values. It seemed that a clear and specific harbour plan could provide a possible win-win situation for everyone.

GIBSONS LANDING HARBOUR PLAN – PART TWO – REALIZING THE VISION

The Town of Gibsons has spent a great deal of time and money planning the Gibsons Landing Harbour area over the years, so when they realized the need for a definitive harbour plan in 2009, much of the work had already been done. Aided by a diligent planning committee, the town planner composed a comprehensive request for proposals. The Town then hired a consulting team called MATRIX to amalgamate previous planning work, present it to the community, and ***"help the public choose how the jewel of their community could grow in a way that protects and retains the small fishing village character of the Harbour Area."***

PHASE ONE of the planning included a design charrette and two public open houses. The meetings were well attended and fostered sincere community engagement. Acceptance of differing ideas and perspectives permeated the process, and it seemed to be somewhat of a cathartic experience for the community after what had happened with the Shoal Bay proposal. The following account aims to convey some basic elements of the process.

Gibsons' OCP was built on the theme of ***"maintaining the small town atmosphere of Gibsons,"*** and this theme resounded clearly throughout PHASE ONE of the planning process. Evidently, the citizens of Gibsons take their OCP very seriously. Protecting the small village character with specific design guidelines and definitive building heights and sizes was a basic mandate of the harbour plan as were definitions of environmental standards for development such as LEED. Also a priority was a traffic analysis to address traffic issues generated by future development and its impact on the community's goal to be pedestrian and bicycle friendly.

Discussions about economic viability focused on the need for an economic driver in the Landing. Different ideas were considered including the need to define *"what is Gibsons."* Visioning revealed the concept of the ***"WORKING HARBOUR"*** at the root of the small fishing village character and provided a potential foundation for economic growth and stimuli. Expanding opportunities for fish(ing)-related jobs and small-scale boat building, maintenance, and repair were identified as appropriate industries. The idea that Gibsons should build on what it has rather than re-inventing the wheel came through in

discussions about the potential for expanding business opportunities through the arts and culture scene. The comparison of Gibsons Harbour to a small-town version of Granville Island seemed to appeal to many. Connectivity of upper and lower Gibsons was seen as an important issue: retaining the village character is good for the town as a whole, and encouraging larger scale development in Upper Gibsons to protect the scale of the village made sense. Residential “legacy” infill in the harbour area was recognized as a way to help fill in the gaps and maintain a stable local business economy.

A potential hotel and convention centre was a focus. Although a sense of nervousness around the scope of the Tugboat Landing Marina proposal infused the conversation, citizens generally supported the concept of a hotel and/or a convention centre in the harbour area as long as proposals respected the small scale and character of the village. Various possible hotel and convention centre locations were identified within the planning area, and the concept of “*boutique hotels*” was established as a way of protecting against mega-projects.

Gibsons Aquifer lies beneath the major development proposal sites in the harbour, Shoal Bay, and TLM. The water table on these lots is very high, and the expense of building drives the density and scale of potential development way up. Guidelines for development over the aquifer based on qualified science were recognized as a requirement of the plan. Contamination or drain-off of “*the best water in the world*” was not an option.

Waterfront development discussions identified that the value of the Shoal Bay lands to the community rested not so much in their development potential as in other possibilities. Among these were the consolidation and enhancement of public access to the waterfront and a continuous waterfront walkway, foreshore enhancement, wildlife and marine habitat preservation, usability of the flat lands, and aquifer protection. People generally agreed that development on Shoal Bay at the highest elevation along Gower Point Road would be acceptable *IF* it respected the Gibsons Official Community Plan.

The idea of a land swap was introduced in an attempt to identify ways in which the Town could acquire the remaining two-thirds of these lands. The idea was ventured that the Town could sell some and/or all of the Holland “Park” lands (Winn Road to terminus of Periwinkle Lane and South Fletcher to Gower Point Road) to purchase as much of the waterfront lands at Shoal Bay as possible. Though citizens were not keen to develop the Holland lands, the idea of a land swap posed a possible positive exchange for the Town to secure more useable land at Shoal Bay.

The desire for more moorage was discussed; however, the GLHA harbour expansion plan was not. The omission may have been because, at the onset of planning, the GLHA told MATRIX that public consultation for their project was complete. The GLHA’s stance was that, in any event, they did not require community buy-in. The desire for more moorage was confirmed through the visioning although the expectation was that any increase would be incremental and within the small town scale. Someone expressed the general sentiment by saying that Gibsons harbour should not end up simply a “boat parking lot.”

The PHASE ONE VISION resulted in clear key concepts that participants of the process appeared to embrace. Citizens seemed happy and excited to see their collective VISION taking shape and moving forward.

However, unfortunate loose ends at the end of PHASE ONE changed things considerably. The Town concluded that it did not have sufficient time or budget in PHASE TWO of the process to provide for

planning its recreational water lease, which extends 300 metres from high water. This fact, coupled with the complex nature of the marina lease and private lease situations, prompted a decision to drop the water from the plan and put off in-depth planning for the marine component until adequate resources could be dedicated, possibly in 2012/13. Therefore, heading into PHASE TWO, the water was missing from the harbour plan....

HARBOUR PLAN VISION KEY CONCEPTS

Place-keeping: *“The Harbour Area has a strong sense of place as it stands.”*

Fit, Grain, & Permeability: *“The grain of the Harbour Area is largely responsible for the perceived village scale and character, and the high degree of permeability”*

Growth & Density: *“The amount of residential growth / increase in density in the Harbour Area must be only so great as is sustainable by: preservation of scale, character, grain, and permeability; preservation of view; and an acceptable impact on parking and traffic.”*

Incremental Development: *“New development should occur incrementally, over time.... Small scale development that corresponds with incremental development will more naturally respect the existing grain of the area.”*

GIBSONS LANDING HARBOUR PLAN – PART THREE – THE ECONOMIC BREAKDOWN

After the visioning process for the Harbour Area plan, Gibsons citizens appeared to be comfortable and confident that they had been heard and understood. Most people were unaware that the water had been dropped from the plan between the public visioning process and PHASE TWO, with noteworthy consequences.

Phase Two of the Town of Gibsons Harbour and Area Plan involved an in-depth analysis of **“the economic dimension of the planning objective.”** It considered possible scenarios for development based on the status quo, the Phase One Vision, and a revamped version of the Vision referred to as VISION 2.0.

The question in Phase Two was “How much development, how much density, is required for economic sustainability?”

The Phase Two analysis concluded that the Phase One Vision was not economically viable. The report suggested that the land costs in the redevelopment areas in the Harbour area are too high. Additionally, the report said that allowable densities in redevelopment areas are too low to attract investors, and that the mixed-use zoning calls for too much commercial development and not enough residential development. (Residential is much easier to sell and sells at higher rates.) This determination seems to have been based in large part on a residual land value approach. This approach breaks down like this:

Residual Land Value = Net Income from Sales minus both Total Project Costs (other than land) and Projected Profit. But analysis based on this approach is questionable since it appears that the land values placed on waterfront and Town-owned lands were based on 2010 BC Assessments, not appraised market value or the actual amount paid by landowners (who may have purchased the land years ago at a much lower price), and it does not appear to consider the declining realty market. Moreover projected profit can be derived in a highly subjective way.

Economic benefits of the Marine element of the harbour, including the GLHA, Gibsons Marina, the Town of Gibsons recreational leases, and the private leases in the harbour, were excluded from the planning before Phase Two began. However, the commercial harbour and marina use make up 30% of the total planning area and are purported to generate large-scale economic benefits. It is unclear from the study just how much the omission of the marine element affected the economic breakdown of the land use plan. The Phase Two study did not discuss whether or not the original Vision would have been realistic had the marine elements been included in the overall analysis of how much development is required for the harbour area to be economically viable.

HOW TO PAY FOR WHAT WE WANT?

Phase Two considered and described basic options for how to acquire and/or pay for green objectives, maintenance, and development of Town lands and more parks. Options included increased tax base and the sale/lease/development of municipal lands, development cost charges (DCCs), amenity contributions when proposals come forward, and other related development revenues such as permits.

CONNECTIVITY. A major element of the Phase One Vision was the idea that any larger scale development in the Harbour Area should occur on the hillsides cascading from Upper Gibsons rather than on the waterfront in order to exploit view potential while still protecting against degradation of existing view opportunities. More importantly, development on the hillsides would protect the scale of the village. The economic analysis was therefore expected to consider the Harbour area as one part of a larger Town. As such, business, industry, and development in Upper Gibsons were seen as a valid and worthwhile trade-off to facilitate the economics of maintaining access to the waterfront, acquiring parks, and supporting unique marine amenities and services that would benefit the community as a whole. Connectivity and Transit were also a fundamental part of this concept from the inception of the planning. Although the text of the Phase Two study acknowledged that the economic viability of the Harbour Area is not independent of the Town as a whole and that the area may never be entirely economically self-sufficient, it is not apparent whether the economic viability breakdowns actually factored this in.

“That land swap”

It is also unclear in the Phase Two report whether or not the Holland Park/Shoal Bay land swap was actually analysed. I could find no concrete numbers related to it. From what I have gleaned from various sources, the idea was considered theoretically but no detailed economic analysis was done. The report suggests that the entirety of Holland Park would have to be sold to purchase Shoal Bay, leaving insufficient funds in the budget to rebuild Town Hall up the hill. But the report does not discuss selling

“some” of Holland Park, leaving Town Hall where it is, and buying “some” of Shoal Bay with the revenues. Nor does the report consider that marine setbacks in any trade-off are undevelopable land (according to Thurber Engineering) already owed to the Town, independent of amenities payable at the time of rezoning.

In the draft Harbour Plan, Holland Park (Town Hall on South Fletcher to the water fountain on Gower Point Road) has been re-designated from Administration Zone to “mixed-use residential/commercial.”

The Shoal Bay land use designation has gone from mixed-use residential/commercial to residential/tourist accommodation allowing for high-density multi-family residential without the commercial.

So, no swap and both are developable.

Because commercial zoning is less attractive to developers (it is less valuable and more difficult to sell than residential units), the draft Harbour Plan proposes the “upgrade” to the land use designation from mixed-use residential/commercial to residential/tourist accommodation as an attractant for investors. Take the Hyak Marine Services Inc. site as an example. The site is currently zoned Comprehensive Development Area (CDA), meaning the lot must be re-zoned before development can occur. The current land use designation in the OCP (i.e., what the town wants for the land) is mixed residential/commercial. The Harbour plan re-designates this land as “residential/tourist accommodation.” In changing this land use designation, the Town concedes the ability to maintain the commercial floor space size cap of 2500 square feet, which is part of the zoning bylaw, when the 70,000-square-foot Tugboat Landing Marina project comes forward for re-zoning. If the Town kept the land use designation residential/commercial, the size cap could be used as a negotiating tool. Instead, with this Harbour Plan the Town has given benefit to the developer by re-designating the land use and taking out the less valuable commercial area, without receiving anything in return.

The plan also suggests that **the town should acquire a 15m right of way along the entire waterfront** whenever possible by means of purchase, amenity contributions, and “density bonusing.” With density bonusing, the Town allows a developer to build higher density development (more units per square meter) as a trade-off for land left to the Town as park or right of way. The end result of density bonusing would be that instead of selling part of the Holland Lands to buy part of Shoal Bay, the Town would allow more units on Shoal Bay as a way to maintain access to the waterfront and acquire park.

Instead of developing Holland Lands to buy Shoal Bay, the plan suggests developing Holland Park for the money it will bring to the Town via increased tax base and development revenues. This is not what the community asked for.

The question of how much development is required for economic sustainability in the Harbour Area was teased out and evaluated by MATRIX economists in Phase Two but there were **still many unanswered questions**.

Unbeknownst to the community, key elements of the community-driven Vision appear to have been completely overlooked in Phase Two. **When the resulting draft plan based on Vision 2.0, came before the public,** it did not receive the kind of support at all that the original Vision 1.0 received at the end of Phase One. Many citizens expressed concerns. The public process at this stage of the planning, however, did not engage the public to nearly the degree that Phase One had. Citizens were asked to write their comments down and submit them, but there was no real dialogue. The issues I am raising here did not really come into the conversation. There was a sense that citizens were unsure about how their Vision had so notably changed. Still, the visioning process had established trust for the consultants with the result that the community may have taken for granted that their vision had been thoroughly explored. They therefore accepted the conclusion that their original vision simply was not “economically sustainable.” I submit that on closer examination, the economic analysis of the Phase Two report is not comprehensive or based on what the community asked for. Should the town and the community rely on a partial report to guide decision-making on the future of the jewel of the community?

The final part of this series looks at some particulars from the Draft Harbour Plan for citizens to consider.

GIBSONS LANDING HARBOUR PLAN – PART 4 – THE DRAFT PLAN HEADING FOR PUBLIC HEARING

To be clear, this is a critique.

Former Town of Gibsons municipal planner Chris Marshall always told the citizens of Gibsons that community input and critique “help to raise the bar” for development in Gibsons. He saw citizen participation as a positive thing, and I agree with that sentiment wholeheartedly. In an article entitled “**Trouble in Paradise**” published in Vancouver magazine in March 2009, Chris Marshall described the public hearing process for Shoal Bay saying, “the one thing I couldn't tell people is [whether] it does or it doesn't meet the small-village character It didn't.”

So ... what's the plan?

The Draft Harbour Plan facing public hearing was undertaken in order to define small village character and implement specific limitations and opportunities for development in the harbour area. The intent was to prevent the divisive community infighting that occurred in reaction to Shoal Bay from recurring when the next major development project came forward. The Phase One Visioning was a great success. Between Phase One and Phase Two, water uses were dropped from the plan, and the focus of Phase Two became the economic viability of developing the area lands. Phase Two resulted in a revised yet partial “economically sustainable” version of the community's Vision. This Vision 2.0 was used to develop the Draft Harbour Plan coming to public hearing on Tuesday, February 28th, 2012.

So, has the Plan defined limits for development proponents which will protect the scale and character of the Landing and prevent tension in the community?

The Draft Plan contains a number of recommendations and policies around land use planning. Obviously, a great deal of work has gone into the planning and some progressive concepts have been put forward in the Draft Harbour Plan. **But getting down to the nuts and bolts** of these policies, the plan

has missed the mark of definitive limitations and opportunities. For instance, the language of the plan is noticeably tepid. Policies are filled with phrases like “the Town should actively encourage,” “explore options for,” “evaluate,” “support,” and “recognize.” What you won’t find much of in the 59-page report are definitive words like “must,” “required,” “essential,” “obligatory,” or “mandatory.”

Definitions for height restrictions and massing limits remain vague. For example the *Development Permit Area (DPA) No.5 – Harbour area-wide design guidelines* re: building scale and massing says, “Facades facing [these] pedestrian routes shall be no more than two storeys in height, or, where a height of greater than two storeys is allowed, shall step back a minimum of 3m (10ft) above the second floor,” and “Building massing should be low near the waterfront stepping back from the water.” One of the main issues citizens had with Shoal Bay was the ambiguous description of four storeys that turned out to be five storeys. As a requirement of the Harbour Plan, the community explicitly asked for a definition of maximum allowable heights in feet and inches (or metric), particularly on the waterfront.

The question remains, what is the maximum allowable height limit on the waterfront along the beach path and what exactly does “low massing” mean?

The Harbour Plan was based on an array of studies and guiding policy documents including the *Town of Gibsons Official Community Plan Reconnaissance Study of the Geotechnical Hazards and Biophysical Environment Report* done by Thurber Engineering in 1991 as referenced on pg 49 of the Harbour Plan. The Thurber Report emphasizes “that a 15m horizontal geotechnical setback should apply along the entire ocean shoreline.” The document reiterates this stipulation a few times, yet the Harbour Plan DPA No. 5 does not include this 15m marine setback. Realistically this setback may not be logistically functional on some waterfront lots in the Town, and it would not apply to existing development; however, if applied in relation to subdivision and re-zoning applications, these undevelopable lands could not end up being used as expensive trade-offs for amenity contributions or density bonusing when the Town tries to acquire waterfront lands for the beach path.

The elephants in the room...

Effects of climate change and rising sea levels were considered in the Harbour DPA and a condition set that “new developers in close proximity to the water’s edge will be required to consider future hydro geological conditions in the overall design, incorporating strategies to reduce the impacts of sea level rise.” Current accepted climate science predicts sea level will rise by at least two meters by the end of this century. That works out to just under an inch a year, not including predicted dramatic increases in storm surges.

Aquifer protection is addressed in the Plan with a policy in which the Town will require proponents to “engage hydro geological strategies for aquifer protection.” In fact, the Town of Gibsons already has a *Preliminary Aquifer Protection Plan* done by Piteau and Associates Engineering Ltd. in 2005. In their plan, the consultants describe the possibility of groundwater contamination by salt water as a result of ground water pumping, which was a part of the Shoal Bay development proposal and would almost certainly be required to develop the Hyak Marine Services Inc. site. The Town has undertaken aquifer mapping (which is nearly if not already complete), and the latest information derived from the mapping could form an integral part of an updated Aquifer Protection Plan for the “best water in the world.”

But the draft Harbour Plan, rather than espousing the OCP recommendation of a marine setback and an overall aquifer protection plan, **leaves the responsibility to developers** to undertake individual studies regarding climate change impacts and aquifer protection as these relate to their own projects. Developers are to come up with their own impact mitigation and enhancement requirements. **This does not meet the public demand** for a Town-led aquifer protection plan and state-of-the-art climate change strategies.

Experience shows that placing the onus on developers is not working out so well for the Town of Gibsons. For instance, the Town has had ongoing problems related to specialists' reports and recommendations in the Gospel Rock Neighbourhood Area Plan (GRNAP). For the Harbour Area planning process, the citizens of Gibsons specifically asked that the Town take control of professional studies and implementation of recommendations and policies in order to avoid faulty and/or biased studies or disputes as to the validity of reports in general. They asked that development proponents pay for the necessary studies (which proponents would be required to do anyway) within re-zoning applications, but that the Town choose the consultants and specialists and define their own protection, mitigation, and enhancement criteria.

This argument is particularly relevant in light of the Town's current problems dealing with complaints and scientific arguments disputing work done for the GRNAP. Adding insult to injury, the Town of Gibsons has recently been saddled with a \$60,000 consulting fee that they expected development proponents to pay. In a statement released to the public at a February council meeting, the explanation given for the default on payment was that "the parties involved had different expectations of the process." By taking control of administering professional studies and implementation strategies, the Town could set clear and definitive guidelines and forestall grounds for the "differing expectations" pretext. One could hope such clarity would even alleviate the incessant fear of litigation that seems to have permeated Council's every move.

All in all, the plan has considered some complex topics and begun to make sense of how to deal with many of them. But has it addressed the issues it was meant to contend with? How can the Town implement the details of this plan effectively?

Based on this plan, will the next major development proposal to come forward in the Gibsons Harbour Area be something citizens can anticipate and celebrate without fear of its ruining their small town character? Or will it end up in another divisive battle?

You decide.

Gibsons Harbour Plan Report Phase One

<http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/pdf/Gibsons%20Harbour%20Plan%20Report%20January%2026%202010.pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103>

Gibsons Harbour Plan Report Phase Two

http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/2011planning/05052011%20Phase%20%20Report_finalsmaller_2.pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103

Gibsons Harbour Plan

http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/pdf/2011.11.09%20TofG_HarbourAreaPlan_final.pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103

Official Community Plan

[http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/officialcommunityplan/985%20\(Smart%20Plan\).pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103](http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/officialcommunityplan/985%20(Smart%20Plan).pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103)

OCP zoning bylaws

<http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/bylaws2010new/1065%20Zoning%20Bylaw%20-%20Consolidated%20December%2022nd,%202010.pdf>

Coriolis Report

<http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/pdf/GLHA%20Coriolis%20Report%202005.pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103>

Thurber Report

<http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/openhouse/Thurber%20Report%2022oct91.pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103>

Aquifer protection plan

<http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/annualreports/GibsonsAnnualReport2005.pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103>

Trouble in Paradise

<http://www.gibsons.ca/images/stories/pdf/Gibsons%20Harbour%20Plan%20Report%20January%2026%202010.pdf?phpMyAdmin=578c4ef10034t5c99462br3103>

GIBSONS HARBOUR PLAN PUBLIC HEARING Tuesday, February 28th, 2012 – 7:00 pm at the Cedars Inn
