

# Sparks fly over George economic impact

GIBSONS



Image submitted

The George Hotel and Residences view from the proposed seawalk.

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The economic benefits of the proposed George Hotel and condo project sparked a testy debate at Gibsons council Tuesday night, as councillors split over a motion to request a third-party study of the project's financial viability.

"For us to determine whether a hotel will be financially viable and successful — it's not our place to do that," Coun. Gerry Tretick said. "The person who invests \$80 million, or whatever it ends up being, is the person that does that."

Arguing in favour of the motion, Coun. Dan Bouman said the developer's claim that the project would create 130 jobs with an average salary of \$40,000 is "way out of line with what happens in the hotel industry."

Since the Town is "not getting something for nothing," a third-party study would be "a reality check about some of these seemingly wild figures," Bouman said.

"This project would change the town. We have a right to know whether the financial figures that are being used to sway our position have a basis in reality. We need to know what the real benefits are — what can be certified by independent analysts — and not be manipulated in any way," he said.

"Of course the developer's going to put a big smiley face on everything, but we need to know what the truth is."

The Town has never placed that demand on any new business, Tretick fired back.

"When a grocery store comes in, we don't do that. We don't do it for Starbucks. We don't do it for a health unit. We just don't do it. But because you don't particularly like this project," he told Bouman, "you want to have that particular item included."

All that would do, Tretick said, is slow down the application process.

"It's obvious as the nose on your face there will be economic benefits," he said. "How much, is the question you're asking. Well, it's more than we've got right now."

Bouman turned to Mayor Wayne Rowe and raised a point of order.

"Generally we discuss the issue, but not the motivations of the people around the table," he said, denying he was "trying to slow anything down" but rather carry out due diligence and "protect the Town from things that may not turn out to be true."

"I'll apologize for that," Tretick replied, "but you're also implying that the developer had a big smile on his face and is doing this for other reasons, so that's the same kind of approach that you're taking."

In the end, the motion was defeated, with Bouman and Coun. Lee Ann Johnson voting in favour and Tretick, Rowe and Coun. Charlene SanJenko opposed.

Rowe, however, did not rule out revisiting the motion after other studies are completed, and director of planning Andre Boel said staff would report back on the project's impact in terms of municipal taxes, development cost charges and infrastructure.

While the 3-2 vote split continued on motions to move forward with a draft zoning bylaw and development permit for form and character, council did find common ground on other issues.

Bouman withdrew his notice of motion for more in-depth aquifer studies, accepting the recommendation by Boel after learning that the Town would use Waterline Resources, which undertook the Gibsons aquifer-mapping study, as the consultants.

And, after a lengthy debate, council voted unanimously to accept Johnson's revised motion for staff "to arrange further visual information on the project."

Johnson had originally asked for 3D modelling of visual impact by a third party, including eye-level illustrations from a range of vantage points.

"The height variation here is really extraordinary," Johnson said. "It's close to three times what the citizens of this community had proposed in the harbour area plan. That's extremely significant — it's not just a little bit here and there — and it's very, very difficult to imagine the actual implications of that."

Explaining her opposition to the draft zoning bylaw amendment, Johnson argued that an official community plan (OCP) amendment was necessary first, given the height and scale of the building.

But only Bouman agreed, and Rowe read aloud from Boel's report outlining how the proposed zoning for the project was consistent with the OCP's future land-use designations.

"I don't take away from your point," Rowe told Johnson, "but at the same time I make the point that it was in my view addressed."