



2006 | Planning
District of Ucluelet
British Columbia
 Population: 1,659



Walk The Talk — Ucluelet's Official Community Plan

Summary

Declines in the forestry and fishing industries prompted Ucluelet to turn to tourism to sustain its economy. But that decision created development pressures that could have an impact on the area's natural beauty, the very reason why tourists visit. With only limited resources and a one-person planning department, the community devised an official plan. The plan requires developers to include social and staff housing, to allow for public waterfront access and to use alternative development standards, such as permeable surfaces to reduce stormwater runoff and the LEED Green Building Rating System. Ucluelet provides developers with density bonuses in exchange for more parkland, amenities or cash. The District has already received \$9 million in combined parkland, cash and amenities, including a new skateboard park and basketball court, under this arrangement.

Background

Located approximately 300 kilometres north of Victoria, Ucluelet is home to some of Canada's most spectacular geography: ocean views, sandy beaches, islands and inlets and the temperate rainforests of British Columbia.

The district's economy had been dominated by forestry and fishing, but over the last decade these industries declined. Pressure from new developments began to pose a threat to Ucluelet's natural environment.

"There had been a lot of construction activity and Council realized that development pressures would only increase," says Felice Mazzoni, Ucluelet's Director of Planning. "To be proactive, rather than reactive, Council sought to ensure that future developers would give back to the community."

In 2003, the district created an Economic Development Corporation to promote and steer new economic activity, and also began reviewing its Official Community Plan (OCP).

"We want to achieve sustainability while protecting our sense of place," says Mr. Mazzoni. "The character of the town had to be protected but we also wanted to encourage the right kind of development."

Project Development

The review of Ucluelet's OCP began in 2003. With a limited budget and a one-person planning department, Ucluelet had to rely on partnerships. A key partner that helped with community consultation during the review was Malaspina University-College in Nanaimo. Mr. Mazzoni recalls a chance meeting with Dr. David Robinson of the university, who was visiting Ucluelet with some of his students.

"He asked me to participate in a planning presentation to the students and then to visit Malaspina to give a lecture," he recalls. "The students were fascinated with planning and, with Dave Robinson reciprocating the partnership grew into a formal alliance."

The result was a surge in interest by the public. "The students organized open houses and meetings and that gave me time to help structure the process, organize the policy around it, and listen to what people had to say," says Mr. Mazzoni. "They did an excellent job and many of their professors were pleased to see how much influence their students had."

Using the public's input and ideas, the District spent seven months modifying existing policies and creating new ones to guide the town forward using sustainable development initiatives and innovative techniques. Council adopted the new OCP in April 2004.

Project Implementation

Ucluelet's OCP was created by the community and developed by a dedicated steering committee composed of business owners, high school students, real estate agents, and municipal representatives.

Compared to the previous OCP, several new smart growth policies were added that addressed staff and affordable housing, density bonus systems, LEED guidelines, Alternative Development Standards (ADS), and public access.

Up to 20 percent of units in all new multi-family and condominium developments must now include affordable housing units, as defined by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation. Developers must build these units at their own expense.

Mr. Mazzoni explains that developers cannot build a hotel or multi-family condominium without adding staff or affordable housing units, nor can they receive occupancy approval until those units are built and ready for occupancy. Overall, the development community has reacted positively to the policies.

"The development community likes certainty, they don't like surprises," says Mr. Mazzoni. "They know exactly what's expected so there is respect on both sides."

A density bonus system was new territory for Ucluelet. This system allows developers to build at a higher density rate in exchange for parkland, amenities or cash provided to the municipality. Mr. Mazzoni explains how it works.

"The developer may receive a density bonus, which can take the form of additional lots, units per acre or increased commercial or industrial square footage of building area," explains Mr. Mazzoni. With that increased density, the developer must either create and dedicate more parkland, pay cash, or build hard amenities such as a skateboard park. The district may also take a combination of all three. The amenities are decided and approved by Council and any cash received is deposited in an amenities reserve fund."

Compliance with LEED guidelines is encouraged under the district's land-use policies and developers receive a five percent density bonus if they choose to follow them. ADS also fall under land-use policies. They mostly cover stormwater management techniques, such as the use of permeable surfaces, narrower roads, and French drains. (To create a French drain, trenches are filled with gravel and topped with sand. Water collects in the channel and the drains eliminate excess water from low points or areas prone to saturated soil.) These standards offer alternatives to the curb-and-gutter design common in most new subdivisions.

One of Ucluelet's most successful moves came with its policies for public access. The eight-kilometre Wild Pacific Trail, which skirts the shores of Vancouver Island's west coast, was already in place, but the previous OCP required developers to provide only 20 percent public access when building new waterfront developments. The new OCP requires 100 percent public access, where feasible.

The district negotiated that a right-of-way be created in front of all hotels, condominiums and multi-family developments along the waterfront. Developers bear the cost of building the new sections of the trail.

"There were some challenges, such as building safe sections of the trail and integrating the trail with development without detracting from its character," says Mr. Mazzoni. "But the policy helps protect the waterfront and allows the public access to the trail."

In keeping with the district's philosophy of requiring developers to give back, the district has collected \$100,000 from developers through OCP policies. This money goes into a new social reserve fund to help community groups strengthen Ucluelet's social network and infrastructure, and to obtain matching funds from other sources. "We took a lot of risks and pushed the envelope and we will continue to refine our policies and make them better," says Mr. Mazzoni. "The OCP has set the framework for other projects to flourish, so we are in control of our future."

Results

- An inventory of archaeological sites and environmentally sensitive areas was developed to guide and control future development. The data will be forwarded to B.C.'s Ministry of Environment to augment their database. "We consulted with First Nations bands and we may allow some of those sites to become interpretive areas, or simply leave them in their natural state."
- The density bonus system has netted the district approximately \$9 million in combined cash, amenities and parkland, and has helped retain greenspace (between 40 percent and 60 percent of total natural greenspace area included in development properties, compared to a provincial requirement of 5 percent).
- In areas where the density bonus system has been applied, overall density has increased by between 20 percent and 30 percent. In addition, 108 staff and 90 affordable housing units have been secured through covenants and will be built before the developer receives occupancy approval.
- ADS have been applied in two developments and include French drains, narrow roads and pedestrian pathway vegetation buffers. Concrete sidewalks were replaced with asphalt and gravel pedestrian paths, located away from the roadside. The district also installed energy-efficient street lighting and underground hydro services. ADS have helped to reduce stormwater runoff in an area that receives up to 12 feet of rain each year.
- As a result of the OCP review process, and after the plan was adopted, residents formed the Ucluelet Development Task Force. "It was a group of concerned citizens who wanted to have a proactive discussion about development," explains Mr. Mazzoni. "I join them every once in a while to let them know what's going on and they give me their ideas and suggestions."

Lessons Learned

- **PARTNERSHIPS ARE KEY.** Malaspina University-College was an invaluable partner in the public consultation phase of the community plan and also helped by paying salaries to some students. In addition, the development community has reacted positively to the new guidelines. "One of the main reasons for that is marketing," explains Mr. Mazzoni. "There is a market here for green, low-impact and sustainable buildings. People want an extraordinary product rather than the typical curb-and-gutter urban development and because developers are giving back, it fosters trust and acceptance."
- **GO BEYOND ACCEPTED GUIDELINES.** Ucluelet chose to adopt both LEED standards and ADS. The LEED standards address environmental performance within buildings, while ADS cover stormwater infrastructure. Together, LEED and ADS will help create more sustainable neighbourhoods in the future.
- **IMPLEMENTATION IS OFTEN MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE POLICY.** It is often the case that innovative municipal policies fail due to poor implementation. Since 2004, the OCP has been amended only once, to change the density bonus ratio. As well, the OCP was structured so that new development pressures trigger policy changes.
- **PUBLIC AND POLITICAL SUPPORT IS CRUCIAL.** "A policy document is only as strong as its political support and our Council championed the process," says Mr. Mazzoni, reserving his greatest praise for the citizens of Ucluelet. "Without their input and determination, it would have been impossible to build those policies."

Related and Future Initiatives

Density bonuses will help fund the majority of a new \$6 million community centre. It will include a conference centre, commercial and office space, a concert hall, interpretive areas for children and adults to learn more about Ucluelet's natural environment, and space for indoor sporting and leisure events.

Although compliance with LEED standards is optional, some developers are now incorporating them into new buildings. The first building certified to LEED standards will be a multi-family development. Construction was to begin in 2006.

To augment the number of staff and affordable housing units included in new developments, the District is working to create single-family affordable lots that people can purchase. "We're planning to combine the lots with LEED standards," explains Mr. Mazzoni. "LEED is usually applied to commercial or other large buildings and not very often for single-family residential, so we're going to create our own LEED criteria for Ucluelet."

The District is also working on new density bonus guidelines that will cover infill areas. Existing bonuses cover all the large undeveloped areas of the District. In partnership with Malaspina students, the District is also working on guidelines for riparian areas and a new streetscape plan. The riparian area guidelines were introduced to Council in June 2006 and were to be completed by summer's end.

In conjunction with Malaspina University College, Mr. Mazzoni is creating a Community–University Planning Research Alliance for Rural Resource-Dependant Communities in Transition on Vancouver Island.

Partners and Collaboration

Internal

District of Ucluelet

External

Malaspina University-College, Community Research

Alliance Partnership

University of Victoria

Fisheries and Oceans Canada

Parks Canada

B.C. Ministry of Environment

Promotional Activities

A variety of community workshops, kitchen meetings, barbecues, picnics and open houses were held to gather public input on Ucluelet's future. Much of the District is rural and residents opened their homes for small planning meetings. According to Mr. Mazzoni, almost half of Ucluelet's residents (40 percent to 45 percent) were involved in the process. The "wish list" they created was the basis for the goals and objectives contained in the OCP.

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