

Development to preserve forestland

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Another ambitious development project is afoot in the South End but this one could see more than 800 acres of forest land preserved in order to build what amounts to about 72 homes.

That's what around 30 Shawnigan Lake residents learned when they went to a public information meeting last week at the Shawnigan Lake Community Centre to listen to a presentation by Living Forest Communities with respect to a piece of land called Elkington Estate Properties.

The 1,000 acre parcel of land in question is currently owned by the Elkington family, who have controlled it since before the turn of the 19th century.

The family is looking for a new opportunity for the land but something that keeps it very similar to how it is now, which, of course, is a huge forested area.

That's where Living Forest Communities stepped in. It is a development company that has a unique concept for how they develop land.

The main theme behind their efforts is to keep 85-90 per cent of the land in a forest covenant with the Land Conservancy of Canada and the Trust for Sustainable Forestry, with the Cowichan Valley Regional District signing on. The remainder does get developed. But not in the standard way.

"With those three bodies signing on it's virtually immobile," said Doug Makaroff, president of Living Forest Communities. "There's nothing you can do to change it. We're saving all this land for pure outright conservation and ecosystem-based forestry."

The covenant goes on the land and then value-added manufacturing, artisans and agro-forestry is encouraged in the area.

"The thing that makes it unique from most land trusts is that we then transfer residential density to the remaining 10 to 15 per cent," he said.

That won't be high-rises and condo units, however. Think much smaller.

"We've designed really attractive small hamlets, clustered homes," said Makaroff. "You've got to think of a European village or hilltop town where the centre of the hamlet is a common green and the houses surround the common green so that the front doors open out onto a very public experience with maybe an orchard or a play area for kids or a common area for people to gather."



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Conceptual drawings show the plan to give the Elkington Forest development a cosy, hamlet feeling.

Their back doors would open up onto the undisturbed wild forest in all its majesty.

The housing area would be made up of two clusters, one group of 18 small houses and another of 44 along with 10 two-acre lots clustered for agro-forestry.

Makaroff also said the property sits next to the Trans Canada Trail.

"It would be the first stop after Ma Miller's Pub in Goldstream, 11-kilometres up, it would land in what we're calling the Trail-head hamlet. The Capital Regional District and CVRD have come up with numbers that they believe would see between 10,000 and 15,000 users per year that would go right by their door. They're planning a coffee-shop/community centre with a big covered open-air BBQ facility and staging area to take advantage of that opportunity.

Makaroff maintained the infrastructure would be "light on the land," contour-hugging narrow roads, the most sustainable and integrated storm water management, microbiological sewage treatment, geothermal energy production and more.

The building lots would be sold and the money made would allow the group to go back and buy the land that they'd optioned.

"The main thing about it is that we're giving the land owners, in this case the private family of the third generation in that area, an option to not sell their land to the big logger who might come in and log every tree from one survey pin to the next."

He said with the devastation in that area already, the project should be a welcome one.

"It's absolutely unbelievable since between 1999 and the present, the loss of forest land in that area is very significant," he said.

Up next for Makaroff's group is talks with the CVRD and a date for a public hearing.