

Three developers champion conservation considerations



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LIVING GREEN

"It is very different to look at a piece of property primarily from the view of 'what's the highest conservation value,' instead of 'what's the highest real estate value.'"

— Doug Makaroff,
Living Forest Communities

The Elkington Forest development near Shawnigan Lake on Vancouver Island is one of a growing number of new-home communities in which the development process helps conserve relatively untouched land that might otherwise be aggressively subdivided or logged.

"Conservation of the forest is the primary objective of the whole model," Doug Makaroff says while describing the approach of Living Forest Communities to the property. "We are putting real estate to the service of that conservation, and not vice versa."

Modelled after the Trust for Sustainable Forestry's Everwoods project on Cortes Island, the Elkington Forest development plans call for the conservation of about 85 per cent of the property's 950 acres.

Makaroff spent a year walking the land with Barry Gates, a long-time friend of the property's owners, the Elkington family, and a director of the Eco-forestry Institute. He also commissioned an ecological assessment of the property to help identify the 85 per cent that had to be left alone and the 15 per cent which could be used for food production, organic gardening and several communities.

"There were a lot of people very skeptical at the beginning," Makaroff reports, "very suspicious of who's this developer and what's he trying to do."

Makaroff acknowledges that he has to provide landowners the same value and benefits they would receive had they cleared the land.

However, he says, by the end of the public hearing in December, people recognised that ultimately the project is really about conservation.

Several years earlier, and motivated in large part by local concern over the Weyerhaeuser Corp.'s announcement it would sell all of its Cortes Island holdings, Joel Solomon and the Renewal Land Company decided to use development to not only help preserve Cortes' landscape, but also the island's community.

RLC purchased almost 500 acres of forest land from Weyerhaeuser in 2003. It kept 250 acres and sold the rest after registering protective covenants that prohibited any timber harvesting, and limited residential use. On its 250 acres, RLC is developing a 25-lot residential project, Siskin Lane, its aim minimization of the ecological impact of residential use through the conservation of large tracts of forest, regulation of land-use practices and limits on further development.

The project's smaller lot-sizes also allowed prices to be kept relatively low, making them more accessible to local purchasers and therefore attracting a strong percentage of full-time residents.

"For the whole community this could have been a large scar," Solomon says. "Many, many logging trucks for days and days."

Solomon acknowledges that strata ownership, protective covenants and other restrictions probably narrowed the number of potential buyers. But the lots were highly desirable for people who value conservation and community.



Peter Daniel of the Aquattro new-home community outside Victoria thinks his industry is going green because the public wants it to. 'It is not just something that you tack on as an addition; it is something that you think of right up front. And you better if you're going to be successful at selling and marketing.'

Not only did Renewal Land sell all the lots and cover all its expenses, the company was able to support, financially and in kind, other local non-profits and contribute to a stronger island community.

Peter Daniel of the Aquattro new-home community outside Victoria concedes that he initially had purely selfish reasons for his conservation efforts.

"I looked at this as an incredible piece of property, and thought to myself, 'if I was going to live here what would I want,'" Daniel recalls.

"I wanted to create something that had much more natural amenities than anything I had seen."

The 50-acre property skirts Royal Roads University, the water below and the campus above. Zoning permitted 345 detached homes, which if all built, would have left five per cent of the property for park.

After talking at length with neighbours of the property and local environmentalists, and working with the municipality, Daniel put together a proposal that will preserve nearly 40 per cent of the property as natural parkland.

Instead of detached residences, he plans on building almost 570 detached residences, apartments and townhouses.

The project's sales centre will be turned over to The Land Conservancy, who plans to use it as an interpretation centre.

"The public is driving this," Daniel said. "I think that the public is inspiring developers to be conscious of green initiatives. It is not just something that you tack on as an addition; it is something that you think of right up front. And you better if you're going to be successful at selling and marketing."

Both Makaroff and Solomon express similar sentiments. "We are going to see more and more hybrids of how to create things that have their triple bottom line," says Solomon. "The community, the ecology, and the financial components will be factored in increasingly in all financial transactions."

As Makaroff notes, "Deforestation is one the major causes of climate change, with significant release of carbon, erosion of soil and loss of mature habitat."

"I think everybody recognises that we have to start doing things differently in the forests."

If each projects' respective community support is any indication, "conservation first" models will not only be the way we should do development, but also what people will come to expect from development.

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