

Metro Vancouver malls reach for the sky

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That statement might be slightly exaggerated but many Metro Vancouver malls with convenient transit access are hard at work on plans to build residential and office towers on land that used to house surface parking lots.

Oakridge Centre, served by the Canada Line, wants to build 13 towers ranging from 17 to 45 storeys. Brentwood Town Centre, which has a SkyTrain station, proposes to construct 13 towers

on its Burnaby site over the next 20 years. Just a 10-minute ride down the Millennium Line, Lougheed Town Centre expects to have a similar number of highrises within 15 to 25 years.

Lansdowne Centre, on the Canada Line in Richmond, is believed to be considering extensive redevelopment that would include highrises. Mall officials would not discuss the issue.

Even Coquitlam Centre, a retail outpost carved from forest in the late 1970s, expects a significant infusion of high-density development after the Evergreen SkyTrain Line starts running there next year.

Urban planner Gordon Harris feels the “densification” of Metro Vancouver shopping centres is inevitable.

“These are incredibly well-located properties, near transit and with great vehicular access,” he said. “We can’t afford to keep pushing residential development further and further out into the hinterland.

“So expanding the shopping centres’ use to include residential, office and institutional — while keeping a strong retail core — just makes perfect sense.”

Harris, who oversees the development of the UniverCity community on Burnaby Mountain as president of the SFU Community Trust, said the expanding rapid transit system has clearly facilitated the malls’ growth plans, which complement Metro Vancouver’s regional growth strategy.

He feels the pace and type of development clustered around transit stations makes Metro unique in Canada, contrasting it to the highrise residential and commercial development that was built near the North York subway station in Toronto after it opened in 1987.

“(Metro) Vancouver is arguably doing it better because we’re doing it from an urban design perspective, in livable urban nodes with housing and employment,” Harris said.

It’s so important for growth-minded shopping centres to have a transit station nearby that the owners of Coquitlam Centre — a Canadian pension fund — paid a significant portion of the cost of building an Evergreen Line station near their property — Lincoln station.

Morguard Investments vice-president Ken Moffatt, who helps manage Coquitlam Centre, said it’s too early to determine how many highrises will rise around the mall but there’s no question that higher-density development is on its way.

“I think we can take our cue from what has happened around other transit lines that have been built in Vancouver,” he said. “The pattern generally is densification or intensification of residential or commercial developments near transit stations.”

The city of Coquitlam expects the population of its city centre district — the area surrounding the shopping centre — will grow from 8,000 in 2011 to 35,100 by 2041. The number of housing

units is forecast to increase from 3,300 to 16,800 during the same period while the number of jobs in the district grows from 9,000 to 21,900.

“We’re trying to evolve from being a suburban shopping mall with low-level residential development into a true downtown for the northeast sector (which includes Coquitlam, Port Coquitlam and Port Moody),” said Jim McIntyre, Coquitlam’s general manager of planning and development.

“It will have jobs, retail, services, cultural and recreational facilities — all the pieces you would see in any active vibrant downtown core.”

He noted there’s a tremendous amount of highrise development activity planned for other transit stations throughout Metro Vancouver but feels Coquitlam’s turn is coming.

“In a way, there’s competition among municipalities to attract development because there is only so much market out there for that product,” McIntyre said.