

Belterra rezoning application presented to council

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Planning and building a home can be stressful for a family. But for Stephanie Legg and Roger McGillivray, the process of working together with multiple families to plan Belterra Cohousing has been a rewarding experience.

Legg said, “We make decisions by consensus; everyone respects everyone’s opinion. We have numerous committees - a design committee, a community building, a finance committee - and we hold regular information meetings.”

McGillivray said, “It’s been an eye-opener. I have no qualms about living in a community with all those people. I guess it’s a certain type of personality who gets drawn into this kind of process. I go to a lot of meetings on Bowen Island and I see a lot of disagreement. But in this group, it is different. We make sure it works for everyone, every item that comes through.”



Roger McGillivray is excited about moving ahead with Belterra cohousing. He and his wife Stephanie Legg are making a presentation to council on Monday.
Martha Perkins file photo

Legg and McGillivray have been working hard to make their dream come true. Not only do they attend all the Belterra meetings but they rarely miss a council meeting or public information meeting that is related to Bowen’s future. On Monday, March 21, the Belterra rezoning application will be presented to council at the committee of the whole meeting.

McGillivray said, “The planning for Belterra has been going on for three years. In December 2008, we took the concept to the municipal planner. He told us to wait for the OCP update. That process took until June 2010. The OCP update was supposed to be completed last summer but since there are still some loose ends, we decided that we had to move ahead [with the rezoning application]. The reason we want to go ahead is that we want to get it done before election. This council knows a lot about Belterra and we feel that it would be a steep learning curve for the next council to become familiar with the concept.”

In planning the co-housing project, Legg and McGillivray have the support of Andy Beard, Belterra's planner, and Ronaye Matthew, the co-housing specialist who has facilitated four or five co-housing projects. Legg and McGillivray attended every single meeting relating to the OCP update and know that Belterra will be part of the final document. They are fairly confident that the project will move forward. The question is not whether it will happen but how it will happen. The project hinges on density increase or density transfer. McGillivray said, "Ultimately, it is up to council how this will be done. We can't suggest where the density should come from. It is their decision."

Legg brought up the example of North Vancouver's cohousing project Quayside. She said, "They asked for an increase in density and the city gave it to them in return for affordable housing units." If everything goes well, construction will commence in early 2012 and the units will be ready in spring 2013. McGillivray said, "What that means is that we need to have 70 per cent sold before we start construction." To date, Belterra has nine equity members and 10 associate members. Associate members have expressed interest in the project while equity members have committed financially. McGillivray said, "If all our associate members move forward, then we would have the necessary 70 per cent. Apparently, it is exceptional to have this kind of support so early on. Usually the plan has to be more concrete before people sign on. But with Belterra, lots of people are involved in the planning. It's an exciting and satisfying process but it's also time-consuming."

McGillivray said, "The group is coming together better than I ever imagined." Having the input of many different people, from different age groups and different backgrounds, has enriched the plan. McGillivray said, "Our group is very multi-generational but we'd like to have more families with younger kids. Imagine how fantastic it would be for kids to grow up in a neighbourhood like this where they have other kids to play with and lots of people to watch out for them."

Legg added, "Coming together, that's what the common house is for. There are kids' playrooms, a multi-purpose room for canning or artwork. Everyone wanted workshops and community gardens. We also have guest suites in the common house because the units are smaller. Smaller units have a smaller ecological footprint and our units are anywhere from 500 to 1200 square feet. The common house will also be set up for power outages. We'll have a wood burning stove to stay warm and solar panels for hot water. This will be the place to meet when power goes out."