
**APPROVALS PROCESS FOR THREE MAJOR
DEVELOPMENT PROPOSALS IN GIBSONS LANDING**

**PREPARED FOR:
TOWN OF GIBSONS**

DRAFT

CORIOLIS CONSULTING CORP.

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1.0 Introduction

The Gibsons Landing harbour area, which is the main urban waterfront district in the Town of Gibsons, is facing the prospect of major change.

After years of little development activity, there is a surge of interest that includes proposals for marina expansion, waterfront residential development, and a resort hotel.

This interest is not surprising, given the attractiveness of the harbour, the growth in the community, and the wave of development interest that is rippling out from Greater Vancouver and rocking markets in most of the communities within a couple of hours' travel.

On the surface, Gibsons should be prepared to deal with development applications in the harbourfront area. Various development proposals have been kicked around for a few years and it was only a matter of time before one or more became real. As well, Gibsons might take the prize for "most planned small community harbour in BC", with a series of planning studies, harbour plans, user surveys, concept plans, and harbour improvement proposals tabled by the Town, the Gibsons Landing Harbour Authority, the Gibsons Economic Development Partnership, and others over the last decade or so. Most of these have included stakeholder workshops, public meetings, and open houses, so there has been no shortage of community dialogue about the future of the harbour area.

Despite all the studies and plans, though, three current proposals for harbour and waterfront development are raising questions about land use, development density, building height, parking, environmental impact, public access to the waterfront, and urban character that the Town is not sure it is ready to answer.

In 2005, we were asked by the Gibsons Landing Harbour Authority to review the current state of waterfront planning, because of the development interest that was then beginning to emerge and because of the Harbour Authority's own interest in expanding its marina and related facilities in the harbour.

At that time, we observed that "...the Gibsons Landing waterfront is marking time. There is a sense that some development or change is inevitable, given the increasing attractiveness of the community to visitors, investors, and new residents, but there is not a clear vision of what should happen. There is concern that Gibsons is not taking

advantage of opportunities for improvement in the harbour area and there is simultaneously a fear that inappropriate development will ruin the charm, character, and scale of the harbour area.”

We found, as noted above, that there were many plans for Gibsons Landing, but not a current, adopted, specific plan that clearly articulated a community-endorsed, Council-approved, and landowner-supported vision for the waterfront.

While hesitant to suggest yet more planning, it became clear to us that the prospect of major development proposals, without the guidance of a plan, would create tension in the community. So, we concluded that Gibsons “...has outstanding potential to be an interesting and attractive harbour combining a working waterfront, commercial areas aimed at tourists and residents, housing, and marina space...there is an opportunity to plan for new development and improved harbour facilities that will enhance the local economy, improve the natural environment, and make the waterfront more enjoyable for residents. The challenge will be to realize this potential while maintaining the character and scale that residents value...*Gibsons Landing will benefit from a plan that guides the development of new marina facilities, provides a vision for development of waterfront lands, and finds the appropriate balance between accommodating growth and protecting the area’s character*”.

In the 18 months after we wrote that, little happened on the planning front or with the development proposals. In early 2007, however, three significant proposals appeared to gain new vigour. Now the Town is faced with the prospect of three major applications and is concerned that it is not adequately prepared to deal with them.

The Town asked us to review the situation and suggest a course of action.

2.0 Summary of the Development Proposals

The three current significant projects are all in a relatively small area in Gibsons Landing.

The first proposal is an initiative by the Gibsons Landing Harbour Authority. The GLHA has a plan, and is seeking funding, for a major expansion of its marina and related facilities in the harbour. This plan (or versions of it) has been around for a while, but the absence of capital funding made it seem more idea than project. However, there is growing momentum behind this project and it now includes new elements such as pocket cruise ship berths, pedestrian ferry connections to Vancouver, and a float plane dock. While there is general acceptance of the need for more berths and associated facilities in Gibsons Landing, the development of new facilities raises major issues such as:

- Where upland parking will be provided.
- Visual effect on the character of the harbour.
- Impact on Gibsons Landing of an influx of passenger-related traffic.

The second proposal is a resort hotel project immediately adjacent to Winegarden Park. This proposal is not yet a formal application, but it is gaining momentum. The most recent version of this proposal includes a relatively tall (by Gibsons Landing standards) building, some proposed changes to Winegarden Park, and some foreshore components that will require habitat compensation. It is not yet known how the developer proposes to deal with parking, but there are concerns about underground parking in this area because of the risk of contaminating an important aquifer that supplies community water.

The third proposal is for a waterfront residential project of about 109 units, just to the east of the hotel proposal. This developer has recently submitted a rezoning and development permit application. This proposal also raises issues about appropriate height and density on the waterfront, how best to accommodate parking, and how to handle public access to and along the waterfront.

These three proposals are at different points in the approval process, but the Town regards all of them as real prospects. The three proponents have apparently decided to host a joint open house session in July to acquaint the community with their plans.

3.0 Why the Concern About These Three Projects?

Gibsons Landing is a small waterfront area in which all of the existing development is small scale. In this context, one relatively large project can have a very large impact on the character of the area, especially if it is inappropriately sited or insensitively designed.

The combined magnitude of the three proposals, should they be developed over a short time frame, could completely transform the character of the waterfront. Consequently, the proposals raise these concerns:

- How will the community react to the scale of change in the harbour? What if the community is overwhelmed, reacts negatively, and rejects any or all of the projects, which would be unfortunate considering the potential community and economic benefits associated with good quality waterfront development?
- What is the appropriate scale (mass, density, height) of development on the waterfront? Are these projects consistent with the OCP or are they too big?
- How will the Town, which has a small technical staff, deal with three large applications at once?
- With three separate applications underway in a small geographic area, how can the Town ensure the necessary coordination among the projects on matters such as waterfront walkway treatment and routing, servicing, access/circulation, underground parking, protection of the aquifer, and compatible character?
- Can the small scale of the local street network handle the additional traffic that these projects will generate?
- How should the Town approach the negotiation of community amenity contributions from the projects that require rezoning? The Town does not have an amenities plan for the harbour area, so some work is needed to develop a sense of how the contributions (such as waterfront walkway) from each project should be determined and coordinated.
- Should the Town be willing to consider land swaps with the hotel or other projects?

These are all legitimate and important concerns. The three development proposals will, combined, affect the character of Gibsons Landing and the appeal of the area to residents as well as future development projects. A single inappropriate or weakly designed project can have a profound negative impact on the waterfront and on the

community's receptiveness for future development. The Town is right to raise these concerns and right to insist that they be addressed before approving any Official Community Plan amendments or rezonings.

4.0 Does the Existing OCP Provide the Basic Framework for Evaluating These Proposals?

The Town of Gibsons has a recently adopted Official Community Plan that includes a detailed section on the Gibsons Landing and harbour area. This OCP draws on extensive previous planning work and community consultation, so an obvious place to start a review of the three development proposals is to see if they are consistent with the OCP.

If the OCP provides an adequate planning framework for Gibsons Landing, then at least the “big picture” elements of the proposals (use, height, density) would be dealt with. There would still be some significant important details, but these could be more easily addressed if it is concluded in advance that the projects are fundamentally consistent with the Council-approved, community-endorsed direction in the OCP. On the other hand, if the OCP does not provide an adequate planning framework, the approvals process is more challenging.

We reviewed the content of the OCP (Town of Gibsons Smart Plan, Official Community Plan, 2005), with regard to the three proposals under consideration.

The Plan’s objectives and policies for the waterfront area are in Section 9.0 Gibsons Landing. The Plan states that Gibsons Landing has “...tremendous potential to become a more vibrant and successful centre with a specialized role in the community. The waterfront setting, active harbourfront, and mix of small businesses are distinct characteristics and assets for future development. However, the historic development pattern with small lots and lanes, plus difficult and/o inadequate parking also present considerable challenges for any new development. Providing for the contradictory demands of development and services while still retaining this inherent ambience is a goal of the Plan...but one that will require considerable design effort to implement”.

The Plan articulates these objectives:

- Maintain and enhance the image of a small scale waterfront town with a working and recreation-oriented harbour and a mix of residential and commercial uses.
- Encourage commercial area revitalization through increased residential densities and a wide range of commercial uses.

- Provide flexibility in design and development standards to recognize the wide variety of lot sizes and circumstances.
- Extend the sea walk.

In the following table, we summarize the OCP policies that seem most directly applicable to the kinds of development contemplated in the three proposals and we note whether the proposed projects appear to be generally consistent or inconsistent with the policies.

Policy	GLHA Proposal	Waterfront Residential	Waterfront Resort Hotel
Support an integrated mix of land use including marina, commercial, residential, and park, including diversity of open spaces, commercial, multifamily housing, civic uses, pedestrian links, public access to/along the waterfront	yes	yes	yes
Maintain the small-scale built form of the village...commercial buildings should be no higher than 2 storeys, residential buildings should be no higher than 4 storeys, hotel may be a maximum of 4 storeys. View corridors must be considered	n/a	Yes in terms of height. View impact depends on siting, design.	Hotel has been described as more than 6 storeys, which does not comply with this policy.
Step building heights back from the waterfront, site buildings to protect views	n/a	Depends on design.	Depends on design.

Require development permits for all commercial and multifamily developments, to ensure that future uses are developed to a form, scale, and character that enhance the intimate feeling of a small waterfront town	Implications for development approval process.	Implications for development approval process.	Implications for development approval process.
Support efforts of GLBA to address traffic flow, public parking, architectural design themes	Proposed facility may have significant parking and traffic implications.	Depends on design.	Depends on design.
Encourage festival retail in Gibsons Landing by locating a floating market/restaurant along waterfront beside government wharf	Not included in proposed marina development.	n/a	n/a
Support an integrated mix of commercial and multifamily housing in the Mixed Use-Residential/Commercial designation (which applies to the proposed hotel and residential development)	n/a	Proposal is for residential only, so does not comply.	If proposal is for hotel (commercial) only, it would not comply.
Ensure residential development is “human” in scale, stepped back from open spaces and waterfront	n/a	Depends on design.	n/a

No overall density for mixed commercial and residential use is established due to the diversity of lot sizes and situations	n/a	Appropriate density must be determined during design process.	Appropriate density must be determined during design process.
Building massing should be low near the waterfront	n/a	Depends on design.	Appears to not comply.
Ensure public access and use of waterfront	Complies assuming docks and floats provide public access.	Requires provision of waterfront access and walkway.	Requires provision of waterfront access and walkway.
Support Winegarden Park with additional multipurpose green space on south, to provide public access and enhanced park setting along waterfront	n/a	n/a	Significant influence on siting and design of hotel.
Create public access along Gibsons Harbour through establishment of a continuous seawalk	Significant influence on design and access.	Requires provision of waterfront walkway.	Requires provision of waterfront walkway.
Retain a mix of uses serving commercial and recreation activities in the harbour to guard against the harbour becoming dominated by uses dominated by seasonal tourism	Proposal includes a mix of commercial, transportation, tourist, and recreational uses.	n/a	n/a
Work with Harbour user groups to increase the size of the harbour	yes	n/a	n/a

Support concept of foot passenger ferry service, subject to dealing with upland parking needs	Includes ferry but does not address parking.	n/a	n/a
Support use of harbour for marina moorage provided adequate upland is available for parking and marina buildings	Includes moorage but does not address parking.	n/a	n/a
Retain character of working harbour	Provides fishing vessel berths.	n/a	Requires removal of existing boat repair facility.
Provide variety of transportation choices. Traffic/Parking Plan may be considered to accommodate ferry traffic	Proposal does not include traffic and parking plan.	n/a	n/a
Prepare a parking plan to provide sufficient off-street parking for residential uses, marina, and public space uses	Does not address parking.	No information.	No information.

The OCP obviously provides high level guidance about the kinds of uses that are preferred for the harbour area, the character that is desired, and the kinds of public realm improvements the community would like to see.

However, reading between the lines, we think the OCP also communicates a fundamental ambivalence about new development in Gibsons Landing. We detected this same ambivalence during the stakeholder meetings and public open house we conducted during our 2005 project. The Town and the public have accepted the idea of new development in the harbour area, if the new development is regarded as a good “fit” with the community. People like the idea of new, interesting uses, a more attractive and accessible waterfront, new investment, but only if the fundamental character of the harbour area does not change.

This is completely understandable, given the small scale, special character, and “comfortable” feel of the harbour. The community would like to see improvement but not a complete transformation to something that feels too urban, too touristy, too crowded, or too un-Gibsons.

The difficulty in evaluating development applications in this setting is that the OCP does not in all important respects clearly define the difference between “acceptable” and “unacceptable” development projects:

- Density is not defined, but is left to a site-by-site evaluation.
- Traffic and parking concerns are flagged but not addressed in detail, in terms of how individual projects should deal with on-site parking, how the small-scale street system will deal with new traffic, and how (or if) the shortfall of general public parking in the area will be addressed.
- “Maintaining the small scale” is not defined in terms of maximum site size for developments or maximum project size, although the OCP is clear that heights should be 2 to 4 storeys depending on the use.
- The goal of a continuous public waterfront walkway is articulated, but there is not a plan to suggest the route or a strategy to acquire the necessary rights of way or the capital funding.
- The overall goal of maintaining a working waterfront is expressed, but it is not clear which existing elements of the waterfront are regarded as necessary to the functionality or image of a working waterfront.

These are not meant as criticisms, as Official Community Plans almost always outline general policies on the assumption that planning and development details will be addressed in more detailed neighbourhood plans, rezonings, development permits and technical studies.

However, when an area is very small, very fine-grained, and very special, it can be possible for a community to agree on general goals, policies, and characterizations of appropriate development and still disagree on whether any individual project is consistent with the vision.

This the heart of the concern in Gibsons Landing: the agreement on the broad language in the OCP does not translate directly into agreement on the acceptability of any individual project because there is much room for interpretation of the “right” scale, density, use, character, and appropriateness of any one project.

In our view, based on what we have seen about the three development projects, three impressions stand out:

- Broadly speaking, the three proposals are consistent with the desired direction for the Gibsons Landing harbour. The addition of multifamily residential, hotel, recreational marina berths, pedestrian ferry, and fishing boat berths are all in principle consistent with the goals for a vibrant, mixed use waterfront that has elements of a working, recreational, and tourism-oriented waterfront.
- In the absence of design details, traffic plans, parking plans, environmental studies, view impact assessments and other technical materials, it is not possible to determine at this time whether the proposals comply with the detailed intent of the OCP regarding the character of projects, their “fit” with the desired vision for a small town waterfront, or objectives such as public waterfront access.
- Each of the proposals contains elements that could cause some concern about appropriateness in Gibsons Landing. For the harbour development, the scale of the tourist/transportation oriented components and the absence of detailed proposals for dealing with the traffic and parking issues might not be fully consistent with the intent of the Plan. For the residential development, the number of units may strike some as being large relative to the scale of other development in the area. For the hotel proposal, the building height, lack of details about parking, and suggested tinkering with Winegarden Park likely cause some concern.

5.0 How to Proceed?

The broad policies in the OCP and the general interest in harbour area development suggest that these proposals could not reasonably be rejected out of hand. Council should be prepared to fully consider (as applicable) the applications for OCP amendment, rezoning, and development permit.

The question is: how best to proceed, given that the proposals are at different stages, involve very different proponents, have some issues in common but some significant issues that are unique to each project, raise some issues that clearly require more technical analysis, and involve some elements that require some degree of coordinated planning?

We see three options for the Town:

1. Process the applications individually as they come in, with no additional contextual planning or detailed development policy work before or during the approvals processes.
2. Hold the processing of applications in abeyance, pending the completion of more detailed contextual planning and the development of more detailed development policies for the harbour area.
3. Advance the applications individually, but with as much coordination as possible.

We have considered the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Process the Applications Individually

This approach recognizes that the applications will not all come in together and that the applicants will prefer to not be held up, either for more Town planning or to wait for the other applicants to catch up.

This approach has several obvious disadvantages from the Town's (and community's perspectives):

- Issues such as traffic, parking, overall impact on character and image will have to be evaluated in isolation.

- The Town will have to move very quickly establish its requirements for public amenities for each project. For the amenities such as waterfront walkway that require coordination, the Town must adopt design guidelines that ensure necessary coordination.
- Project parameters such as density, height, and parking will be dealt with on a project-by-project basis.

There is also one significant disadvantage from the perspective of the applicants. Each applicant will be required to do its own detailed technical studies, even for issues that really should be dealt with in a more integrated fashion. Key issues that appear to require more technical analysis from each project are:

- Traffic impact assessment and mitigation plans.
- Parking plan and parking impact assessment.
- View impact assessment.
- (for the two upland projects) appropriate height.
- (for the two upland projects) impact of any below grade construction on the aquifer.

Hold The Applications In Abeyance Pending More Area Planning

This is likely to be opposed by any of the projects that are prepared to proceed soon. To fully address the planning, urban design, traffic, parking, building height and other issues raised by the proposals will probably require an extensive process needing on the order of 6 months or so. This process would effectively involve preparing a neighbourhood plan for the harbour and upland development sites, with this plan presumably being adopted as an amendment to the OCP. Not only will the applicants have to wait, there is the risk (to them) that the process results in new, more detailed policies and plans that are inconsistent with one or more of the development proposals.

Once the planning work is complete, the three projects would then submit applications unless the proponents found the plans unacceptable.

This approach might send a signal to the market that Gibsons is not really interested in new development after all.

Advance the Applications Individually With As Much Coordination As Possible

This approach balances the need for coordination against the likely desire of the applicants to be able to proceed somewhat independently instead of being tied to the trajectory of other peoples' projects.

This approach communicates that the proposals are, in principle, appropriate and of interest but that there are some elements of these large projects in a small area that must be coordinated or at least addressed in a "big picture" way rather than completely independently for each site.

Recommended Approach

The option of processing the three applications completely independently risks some major problems for Gibsons Landing, in our view. There are major issues such as parking, traffic, building height, public waterfront walkway, community amenity contributions, and aquifer impact that in large measure need to be looked in a comprehensive way, not only site-by-site. We do not recommend this approach.

The other extreme – trying to hold up the applications while the Town plans and studies – is not likely to be acceptable to the applicants and pre-supposes that all of the issues can be addressed in a general way without reference to specific projects. This approach also puts the entire onus on the Town to invest in planning and technical studies in advance of considering the applications. It would have been ideal if some of this contextual planning work had been completed over the last year or so, in anticipation of development proposals, but that did not happen. We do not see "stop the world while we plan" as a practical option at this point.

This leads us to the third option: process the applications but insist that the applicants participate in some coordinated work to address "big picture" issues.

We recommend the following specific steps:

1. Prior to the public open house that the applicants have planned for early July, the Town should advise the applicants that it is not going to hold up the projects for more planning, but it is going to insist on some technical studies and coordinated work as part of the approvals process. In this meeting, the Town and proponents should have as frank as possible discussion about the likely timing of each of the projects (rezoning application, development permit application, building permit application, construction).

2. The Town should advise the applicants that the Town requires the completion of a traffic and parking study prior to public hearing. The applicants can choose how to cooperate in the production of a traffic and parking study, but the Town must be able to understand the implications of the amount of traffic generated by each project, how the proponent proposes to mitigate the traffic impacts, and how the proponent proposes to deal with its off-street parking requirements. Each applicant might do its own study, but in the context of agreeing among themselves about what to assume about the traffic and parking characteristics of the other projects. The Town will gain no value from three traffic/parking studies that each look at individual impacts relative to the existing situation and do not address the combined effects of the other projects.
3. The Town should advise the residential and hotel proponents that the Town is concerned about the impact of underground parking construction on the aquifer. The onus is on the applicants to assess the impacts and determine whether they are negligible or to show how parking can be accommodated without going below grade.
4. The Town should advise the hotel proponent that a detailed view and urban design impact analysis will be required before the Town will consider whether to grant approval for 4 storeys (the current maximum in the OCP) or more.
5. The Town should advise the hotel proponent that, if there is serious interest in proposing a land exchange involving any part of Winegarden Park, this should be discussed in detail before a rezoning application is submitted. If the Town has no interest in such a proposal, then it should advise the proponent accordingly so the proponent can exclude this from the development proposal.
6. The Town should put a high priority on defining its detailed expectations regarding public access to and along the waterfront. This is particularly important for the two adjacent waterfront development sites (hotel, residential). The Town should be in a position to tell the applicants what it expects in terms of walkway siting, width, quality of construction, timing, and continuity.
7. The Town should also invest time in articulating any other expectations (in addition to public waterfront access) that it would have from the respective developments. The proposals require rezoning, so there is an opportunity to discuss voluntary amenity contributions that each project could make.
8. Because the Town does not have much staff, the Town should consider engaging a waterfront project manager to represent the Town in the processing applications and negotiations with developers. Because the projects require rezoning, each developer will presumably negotiate a development agreement or servicing agreement with the Town. Applicants can be advised that one condition of the agreement will be the direct payment of the Town's costs for technical support.

Applicants should be expected to make an initial contribution prior to actually executing the servicing agreement, to fund the Town's costs in processing the applications.

9. The extent to which informal (e.g. open houses and public information meetings) and formal (e.g. public hearing) community events involve coordination between the projects will depend on timing. This is something that should be addressed directly with the applicants.