

Massive mall near Abbotsford interchange stirs up debate

BY BRIAN MORTON, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 3, 2009



Artist's rendering of a proposed \$170-million, 600,000-square-foot shopping mall near Abbotsford's Mount Lehman interchange.

Photograph by: Submitted image, Vancouver Sun files

A new shopping mall planned for an eight-hectare site near Abbotsford's Mount Lehman interchange will be a major retail draw for Fraser Valley residents, according to the city's mayor.

However, environmentalists see the development as the start of a trend that will see green space paved and sprawl spreading up the Fraser Valley along the Trans-Canada Highway, as a consequence of the provincial government's expansion of the highway and doubling of the Port Mann Bridge's capacity.

"The potential regional draw for that centre is enormous," Abbotsford Mayor George Peary said in an interview about the \$170-million, 600,000-square-foot Shape Properties development, dubbed Abby Lane.

"It's huge and it's got amazing freeway access. I think this will be the largest mall in the region. It will be relatively easy for people to get there from Langley, Chilliwack and Mission. Millions travel that freeway and they're all potential customers."

Opponents of commercial sprawl say the new plaza is an example of the type of retail they expect will pop up all along the highway because of the provincial government's Gateway Program to add lanes to Highway 1 and double the size of the bridge.

"They're going to sprawl all the way out to Chilliwack," Cathleen Vecchiato of the Fraser Valley Conservation Coalition said in an interview. "It [the expansion] is just putting more people into their cars."

Vecchiato, a Langley resident, said the planned highway and bridge expansion is fuelling a lot of development proposals, a trend she feels is short-sighted.

She said Abby Lane won't be last of its type. She fears that a "big green section" along the highway in Langley and Abbotsford will see more development. "Once it [the highway and bridge expansion] goes in, it will be an excuse to build more."

But Peary sees the shopping mall as another sign that his city is coming of age. He noted that approximately 400,000 people visit the Fraser Valley Trade and Exhibition Centre (Tradex) each year and another 500,000 people fly through Abbotsford International Airport.

The project, which has been given approval in principle by Abbotsford council, will have access off Highway 1 and draw people from as far east as Harrison Hot Springs and Hope. It is scheduled for completion in the fall of 2011 and will have a "trading area" of approximately 262,000 people.

Peary said the shopping centre will be a series of free-standing buildings accessed from the outside and that he's been told by staff that a huge Wal-Mart Supercentre could anchor the development.

There will also be many small and medium-sized retail tenants.

Peary said the mall is the first major development on a green strip beside Highway 1 east of the Mount Lehman interchange, and that other properties there will also be developed. He said the highway access for Abby Lane will be paid for by the developer.

Darren Kwiatkowski, executive vice-president of Shape Properties, said in an interview the project has the largest dollar value the company has ever undertaken.

"Along the Trans-Canada Highway, there's no development of that nature," he added.

Kwiatkowski said the shopping mall will have a "main street" style, with direct access to stores off the development's streets.

He said it will take about 18 months to construct and will have a mixture of small and large retailers and possibly a theatre.

Kwiatkowski refused to say which stores have signed on and declined comment on whether a Wal-Mart Supercentre would be the anchor tenant in a 150,000-square-foot store.

He said the shopping mall would meet the needs of "a wide range of shoppers," and include higher-end family restaurants and fashion stores.

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