

Townhouse project approved for historic James Bay site

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The construction of 19 townhouses is set to start in a few weeks on the long-vacant site of Victoria's onetime Immigration Building in James Bay.

Three Point Properties has teamed up with developers Dan Robbins and Dennis Rogers for the project on the historic site at 50 Dallas Rd. between Simcoe and Ontario streets.

The developers are promising to protect through a heritage designation the wall that is all that remains of a complex built in 1908 to detain immigrants.

That verbal commitment was made before city council last week approved a development permit for the two-storey townhouses. Following a public hearing, council agreed Thursday to several variances for the project, including relaxed setbacks.

"For us, saving the wall was an absolute must -- it just really adds to the project," Dave Craig, project manager for Three Point, said Tuesday.

Made of concrete and wrought iron, the wall dates to 1908 when the Immigration Building was constructed to house immigrants -- largely Chinese and Japanese -- who were awaiting entry into the country.

The site recalls an ugly era in Canada's history when fear about a massive influx of Asians in the early 1900s led to a head tax and other immigration restrictions.

The two-storey brick building, once housing as many as 200 immigrants cramped into bunk beds, was closed in 1958. Harold Husband, owner of Victoria Machinery Depot, bought the structure and had it demolished in 1978.

Husband's children, including environmental crusader Vicky Husband, recently sold the one-acre property to developer Fraser McColl Jr., who resold it to the current developers.

Craig said an interpretive plaque explaining the historic significance of the site will be attached to the wall.

Plans developed by architect Peter de Hoog call for the flat-roofed, wood-frame townhouses to be clad in brick and built around a central court with a landscaped island. Enclosed parking will be incorporated in the concrete foundations of the townhouses that will require rock blasting, de Hoog said.

The rocky property, south of the Reef condo building and not far from the Shoal Point condos, did not have to be rezoned.



CREDIT: Bruce Stotesbury, Times Colonist
A current view of the property looking on to the Reef condo complex.

Craig said the townhouse developers decided against trying to build something bigger on the site, given strong opposition from the James Bay Neighbourhood Environment Association to higher-density buildings.

"Quite honestly, we looked at what [the Reef and Shoal Point] had to go through and determined that's not the road we wanted to go along," Craig said.

An approval process for rezoning could have taken two to three years, so "We decided, let's keep it simple and do what the community wants," he said.

For Three Point Properties, headed by Three Point Motors car dealer Jack Julseth, the townhouse project is the latest of several ventures the company has become involved with since its founding three years ago.

The company has refurbished the Scott Building at Douglas Street and Hillside Avenue, and is planning to build a community at Bamberton, at the north end of the Malahat Drive, among other projects.

The James Bay townhouse development is expected to be completed by late spring 2007. No prices for the units have been set.

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