

Dear Mayor and Council:

We spent Tuesday evening, September 12, 2017 at the Official Community Meeting going over the new plans for 1201 Fort Street: a new application which is almost exactly the same as the last one, only a little bigger with even smaller setbacks. New clothes, too.

It was a good crowd - about 100 people, including Abstract's staff and cohorts. Of all the speakers only one spoke in favour of the proposal. He is a neighbour who had explained to me in the past that he would prefer not to speak publicly on this issue because he has done work for Abstract in the past. He considered himself to be too closely involved. However, on Tuesday evening, he was compelled to speak, despite his earlier reticence, but without explaining his previous business involvement. The question at hand was, "Why 94?" (I wanted an explanation for why so many units are being proposed for this historic and important green space.) His answer was, and, I paraphrase, that we need 94 units here, (in this park) to save 150 people who now live in Langford the trouble of commuting to downtown.

Abstract's answer to this question boiled down to an explanation about the FSR. Admittedly, the FSR is complex, meant for specialists, but, regrettably tends to confuse the general public. However, I think I captured the essence of it. There is an ideal FSR of 1.40 (or almost) that this development seeks to attain.

This ideal number has been established somewhere else, by someone else and has been adopted by many builders as a happy goal. In our particular case, the old Crease homestead of 1875, my simple understanding of the argument is that once one circumvents the local OCP, changes the local zoning to the match the anticipated FSR, and throws in as many variances as possible, then the property at 1201 Fort Street can attain this FSR. (It was suggested that any number up to and over 300 housing units could easily fit on this site.) So, the goal of 94 housing units is only modest.

I had always thought that these plans had been developed by an accountant. And, it turns out that I was right! The core of their argument is, truly, about financial return. All the other fine words are just talk, "a tale...full of sound and fury, signifying nothing", to quote Shakespeare. It is not about the poor commuters from Langford; it is not about "the" community. But, being good Canadians, we never really, want to talk about that coarsest of all subjects, do we?

With this in mind, I thought I would forward an invitation to you, now expired, that I received to attend an investment seminar on investing in, yes, real estate. When I received the invitation I was somewhat interested. Who isn't interested in making money? But, I declined to register. I was simply too busy, just back from holidays, trying to catch up, and focused far too heavily on the Official Community Meeting. I couldn't think about improving my financial returns when something of such importance was coming up.

Well, it turns out I did attend an investment seminar on Tuesday evening. I did not miss anything at all. Abstract Developments presented an opportunity to make some easy money. With that little twist of 100% rentability, the chance to make a good income is undeniable. And, so close to home! Who knew? Life is filled with irony, isn't it?

Sadly, I have given up thinking about the exciting possibilities this exceptional piece of land presents (beyond housing). I happen to think that the proposal by Abstract for 1201 Fort Street is simply bad; it is a classic case of bad design and over-development. Overall, it is too large, the buildings are too high, and they are too massive. There are too many townhouses, they are crammed together, pressed into a wall, and they are all too tall. And, the absolutely worst thing about the proposal is the lack of 'on-the-property' space, especially of set-backs.

But, the case the corporation made for financial returns is compelling. And, they never had to get down in the gutter and talk money. (Such a dirty subject.) The FSR does it all. When you can squeeze 94 units onto land that in previous years would provide homes for 10 families, who can't smell the money?

In these times, with sensitive infill and multi-unit ground-level dwellings, this property could house 35 families and still save most of the trees, and the urban green space. (This, alone, is an increase of 3500% - a number well beyond the imagination of most neighbourhoods.) But, from the builders' point of view, an increase of 3500% is not enough; from the builder's point of view, an increase of 9400% is more fitting, after all, it is only modest.

Regretfully, the world we live in is a world of "all you can eat"; it is not about housing any more. Nor does community matter. It is not about people or their concerns. First and foremost, it is all about the numbers and the financial return. Investors are desperate for more opportunity – and housing is where the returns are.

Beginning in June 2016, we have tried to convince Abstract Developments to make this development smaller, and the corporation has not listened. If you do choose to allow this development to go through as planned, please remember that the proposal does not reflect the concerns of the local community. Nor does this proposal reflect any concern for the requests of council at the last COTW meeting. If you do vote to allow this proposal to go forward, you may not win any votes from your local constituents, but you will please many savvy investors.

Thank you reading my letter.

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