

GHCA COMMUNITY MEETING REPORT

March 8, 2023

They came to work and to contribute and they did both. Some 35 knowledgeable and involved Gordon Head residents expressed opinions and concerns and made positive suggestions for the future at a community meeting at the Gordon Head Recreation Centre March 8. The meeting was not a complaint session, but an attempt to guide us in future planning for the community.

A summary of the results:

- Participants accepted the need for greater housing density, but were concerned that new planned, approved and under construction developments were too focused on small units such as studios and one-bedrooms. They asked for more townhouses, row housing and other units suitable for families.
- Participants wanted to see more emphasis placed on preserving green space and protecting the environment.
- Participants suggested that Saanich needs to look more closely at the overall effects of development, rather than agreeing to piecemeal approvals when it comes to impact on traffic, parking and transportation.
- They thought Saanich's decisions to drastically reduce parking requirements were based more on an unachievable carless future than on current needs and those of the coming decades.
- Participants wanted to see more consideration of amenities and infrastructure, both of which are seen as lagging development to the overall detriment of Gordon Head as a liveable community.

The Meeting:

GHCA board members Don Gunn and Alastair Wade first described the current state of affairs in Saanich in general and Gordon Head in particular: the Shelbourne Valley Action Plan [Saanich -SVAP](https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/community/community-planning/centre-corridor-village-action-plans/quadra-mckenzie-study.html), current Saanich development of the corridors and villages strategy <https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/community/community-planning/centre-corridor-village-action-plans/quadra-mckenzie-study.html>, Saanich's housing strategy report <https://www.saanich.ca/EN/main/community/community-planning/housing-strategy.html>; and current projects under development in Gordon Head

The GHCA has estimated that as of Last September there were a total of 1921 of new units in various stages of planning or construction in our area. This did not include the 621 net new beds at UVic, more recent proposals of which we are aware.

Participants then divided into groups and went to work addressing four questions for the community's future: development and housing; traffic, transportation and parking; amenities and recreation; infrastructure such as water, sewers, roads and sidewalks.

All groups accepted the need for increased density of housing. A common theme was a concern over the nature of that densification, with developers' understandable desire to maximize profits by including the most units possible and less focus on affordability and size. Participants cited the development figure, which showed a high number of studio and one-bedroom apartments, and speakers after speaker asked for more three-bedroom units, more family units including townhouses and row housing, to help maintain Gordon Head's character as a welcoming place for families with ready access to the community's many schools, and to help multi-generational families stay in the community.

Participants were concerned that some types of densification result in environmental damage, loss of green space, and loss of mature trees. Future developments, they suggested, should include such things as , rooms for activities for residents, and other local facilities, as well as replacement of community meeting places that are being lost to redevelopment. Mixed use commercial space should be included in any large development that does not have such commercial use nearby.

The thorny issues of traffic, transportation and parking brought much discussion. A common concern was the perception that Saanich does not look at the overall effect of development when it comes to these issues, and engineers and planners rely on dubious statistics rather than seeing actual traffic flow. While planners and others seem at home with reduced parking, parked cars crowd residential streets that house multiple residents per house, and care aides are known to refuse assignments in Gordon Head where parking is limited. Health aides and cleaners, with multiple assignments in a day, need to be able to park and move on to their next stop quickly. Relatives and visitors must also park somewhere; not everyone can bike or walk from distant bus stops. Businesses need parking in order to develop and sustain themselves, especially if they sell products not easily transported. Delivery services such as Amazon even now park in the middle of busy roads. Saanich does not seem to have commercial parking zones; perhaps some could be established in busy areas. While the car-free society may be a futuristic aim, developments should be built with some consideration for today's—and tomorrow's--reality.

Participants were concerned that placing concrete blockers around bicycle lanes defies current British research that suggests such blocks make accidents more serious, and leave no place for ambulances to stop. A concern was expressed that a lack of overall planning where multiple developments are approved exacerbates traffic problems. Participants would like to see lower speed limits properly enforced and traffic calming away from major arteries being used as cut-arounds as streets such as Shelbourne and Mackenzie are both narrower and ever more crowded because of development. They had few suggestions about public transportation, except to suggest that it needs to be more flexible and responsive to the needs of busy families and seniors to see a switch from cars to buses, perhaps with more frequent, smaller buses.

Participants were concerned that establishment and expansion of the amenities that make life in Gordon Head attractive lag densification. Developers use the Gordon Head Recreation Centre as a perceived bonus for their clients, but the centre has not been renovated or expanded for decades and cannot meet current demand for spaces in its programs. Restaurants, pubs, day

cares, mixed use commercial, medical centres, usable green space: all are needed in residential areas if planners expect Gordon Head residents to walk or bike to amenities—or even if families will continue to find Gordon Head a good place to live and seniors somewhere to comfortably and sociably age in place. Some suggested that the district should explore opportunities for increased public use of the University of Victoria facilities, and lobby for more public-use recreational facilities in the proposed UVic development of the Ian Stewart Centre. Could schools be used more as meeting places and as community centres, without the current high costs?

Participants were similarly concerned that overall planning for the infrastructure required to accompany increased densification is lagging development approval, and suggested that Saanich invests more long-term planning into the effects of density on roads, sidewalks, and water and sewer connections. Planning should be in place for extreme weather events that may become more frequent. Additional and safer sidewalks are required, since much of Gordon Head—planned as a car-centric community—lacks sidewalks and pedestrians cannot walk crowded streets safely. Lack of sidewalks and increased traffic make it difficult for children to walk safely to school, making it more likely that parents will continue to drive them. Little mention is made of the strains that densification will place on sewer and water systems designed for single family density, or that increased water runoff from greater land coverage will have, for example, on the rebuilding of Douglas Creek.

Overall? If there was a common theme at the meeting, it was not that densification is bad or that single family zoning needs to rule, but that both Saanich and developers need to be putting more thought into the type of densification that is needed and the type of community that would be most beneficial for residents and business owners, both current and those that will be moving into the community.

Participants were also asked how the Gordon Head Community Association could increase its community engagement and diversity. They agreed that the GHCA should continue to take community concerns and opinions to Saanich council and staff. Among the suggestions for more engagement:

- More use of social media, perhaps using Instagram instead of Facebook
- Distribute information through the BlockWatch newsletter
- Consider using languages other than English for communications
- Continue to have community meetings
- Post the GHCA on the NextDoor page
- Community events such as a Lantern Festival, outdoor movie night or barbecues
- Post questions from this meeting online for further involvement
- Have a table at the Recreation Centre to promote membership
- Promote community events on the GHCA website
- Have virtual meetings
- Organize buses or pickups for meetings
- Have a play day for kids and sessions for parents