

## Dan Fumano: Long, winding road leads to 'twisting' tower pitched for ex-Expo site

Opinion: Council considers project pitched for 601 Beach Crescent, part of the Expo lands, that has remained undeveloped

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Renderings for a proposed 55-storey tower near the north end of the Granville Bridge in downtown Vancouver, including commercial space on the ground floor with 152 units of social housing and 303 market condos above. Photo by Pinnacle International/JYOM Arch / PNG

The tower proposed for the north end of the Granville Bridge is striking, featuring what its architects call “undulating curves” inspired by a dancer. But the ground below also has a noteworthy story, which has been long, complex and, at times, legally contentious.

Vancouver council will consider a proposal this week for the 55-storey skyscraper, which would be one of the

city’s taller buildings, intended to form a southern “gateway” to downtown along with Vancouver House’s similarly twisting design just across the Granville Bridge to the west.

The property, at 601 Beach Crescent near False Creek’s north shore, was part of the Expo 86 lands. But in the decades since, this piece of prime real estate has sat undeveloped. The site was owned by Concord Pacific, the international player that bought the Expo land and has already developed much of it. During a four-year process with the City of Vancouver in the 1990s negotiating the rezoning of some of Concord’s lands, the developer transferred 601 Beach to the city in 1999 and the site was earmarked for social housing.

In 2016, the city put 601 Beach up for sale. The property was sold to a private developer, Pinnacle International, with the stipulation that future development must include 152 social housing units, with market housing making up the rest of the project, subject to council’s decision on the rezoning.

The sale was approved in 2016 by Vancouver’s then-Vision-majority council. As with all transactions involving the disposition of city-owned real estate, the decision was made in a closed-door meeting, a city representative said last week, so no further details were available, other than confirming it required an affirmative vote by two-thirds of council.

Within months of the city putting 601 Beach up for sale in 2016, Concord sued the city, alleging the plan to sell the lot for commercial development would violate the terms of the deal through which Concord had conveyed the land to the city.

Concord alleged in court filings that if the property was “sold by the City to a third party to be developed for purposes other than low-rise non-profit housing (e.g., for the purpose of creating a highrise condominium tower), Concord will suffer irreparable commercial harm.”

Concord had notified the city that it is “ready, willing and able” to purchase the site “at an equitable price,” the notice of claim said.

The city denied the plan to sell the land with an eye to future development breached the agreement with Concord and rejected the idea Concord had suffered or would suffer any harm.

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A city representative confirmed last week that Concord’s lawsuit involving 601 Beach “has yet to resolve.” Pinnacle spokeswoman Rachel Thexton said the Concord lawsuit does not affect Pinnacle or its plans for 601 Beach in any way.

The city declined Postmedia’s request last week for an interview to discuss, in general, the strategy of selling city-owned land on the private market to get affordable housing built.

Ann McAfee, Vancouver’s co-director of planning before her retirement in 2006, said that in her three decades at city hall, the city generally didn’t generally sell city-owned property.

“During my time, any city lands stayed as city lands,” McAfee said.

Affordable homes are expensive. Even if the city received free land, building housing and operating it at below-market rents takes a lot of money, more than municipalities have typically been able to afford.

In earlier decades, McAfee said, the city worked with the federal government, which funded non-market housing on city-owned land, such as the development of False Creek’s south shore in the 1970s.

But the federal government pulled out of housing in the 1990s. In 2016, when the city sold 601 Beach, the provincial and federal governments weren’t investing in affordable housing, while Vancouver’s affordability crisis was escalating.

“I suppose that was understandable at the time,” McAfee said. “But I certainly didn’t recommend to council any sales during the time I was running it.”

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Cameron Gray, the longtime director of the City of Vancouver’s Housing Centre, who retired in 2010, said that while the city generally tried to retain property instead of selling it, “in the absence of federal and provincial money, that’s probably what you end up having to do” to get social housing built.

The question before council this week is not whether it was a good idea for the city to sell 601 Beach in 2016. Instead, council must decide whether Pinnacle’s application in 2020 is good for the city now and in the future.

The non-market housing units’ affordability levels will be determined later, but those 152 units would get the city a fair bit closer to its social housing targets, which have lagged behind for years. That helps explain why several social housing groups, including the B.C. Non-Profit Housing Association, have written to the city to support 601 Beach.

Meanwhile, some neighbouring residents have mounted their opposition, with many addressing council earlier this month during the first four hours of public hearing for the project.

Some councillors, based on questions at the public hearing’s first night, seem to share those opponents’ concerns. Others seem interested in seeing housing on a site which has, for decades, been a gravel lot. They’re set to decide Wednesday whether or not to add a new twist to Vancouver’s skyline.