

UBC deserves plaudits for innovative plans for a village in the forest

Thanks to the Greater Vancouver Regional District, one of the final hurdles has been cleared in the University of British Columbia's laudable plan to develop a "village in the forest" on its campus.

The GVRD board of directors approved the plan this week, and now all that's needed is final approval from the UBC Board of Governors, who will consider the issue in December.

UBC plans to develop a community of 4000 on 40 hectares of largely wooded land south of 16th Avenue. The community will include two and three storey townhomes, four storey apartments and 18 storey apartment buildings in a mix of market homes and rental housing aimed at students and faculty.

A total of just under 2000 residences are planned along with a 65000 square foot mixed use village centre on Wesbrook Mall, a 180 suite seniors residence, a public school and a community centre. The plan is part of the broader University Town scheme, which will increase UBC's permanent population to 18,000 by 2021.

Certainly, not everyone is happy with the plan. Some nearby residents object to further construction, and others lament the loss of wooded areas and agricultural farmland at the southern edge of the campus.

The objections of neighbours is understandable since UBC originally had few neighbours and hence often conducted its affairs with little regard for either local residents or regional objectives. This was particularly so during the building boom of the early 1990s.

However, partly as a result of the problems in the 1990s, a comprehensive consultation process was developed that led to the current area plan, which has been in development for more than seven years.

As for the concerns of environmentalists, the village in the forest appears highly sustainable. Conceived as a pedestrian-oriented village, the plan requires that 50 per cent of households in the community be occupied by at least one person studying and working at UBC.

This means that many of those who currently commute through the city will eventually walk or bike to work or school. This should cut down considerably on both noise

and air pollution and on traffic congestion near the campus.

And while some wooded areas will be lost, critics should take some solace from the fact that what is now Pacific Spirit Park was once slated for residential development as an endowment for the university.

Perhaps the best aspect of the entire University Town project is that it could become a model for future developments, whether on or off university campuses. UBC has long been a leader in innovation, and the creation of self-sustaining, and environmentally responsible campus communities is one of which UBC – and its critics – should be duly proud.