

Is this the best use for corridor property?

by Rob Wickson Special to Times Colonist May 29, 2010

I felt a strong sense of dread when I left the open house put on by the developer for the proposed Real Canadian Superstore on the old [Mayfair Bowling Lanes site](#).

When this proposal originally was approved by a prior Saanich council, many of us in the community felt let down. Here we are, trying to find ways to encourage sustainability and reduce the carbon footprint of a population that is mostly waiting for someone else to do something -- and we instead approve an almost 100 per cent car-based development.

So when the development permit timeline passed with no construction, we felt there was hope. Perhaps these landowners were now going to rethink the land use and come back with something that could set the tone for future opportunities.

But this has not occurred. We now see a slightly tarted-up building with some green-washing. It is still a single-purpose building with the customers encouraged to bring their cars.

I wonder what percentage of Superstore customers use public transit, walk or bike to do their shopping. I'll bet it is less than five per cent. If so, with almost 400 parking spaces to be filled, the increase in car traffic is likely to be substantial.

I have seen concerns from community neighbours about additional 70 parking spaces in a residential building where vehicle movements would be one or two per day per vehicle compared to the constant movement from the shopping centre.

As long as we continue to subsidize cars by hiding the real economic costs of free parking, we will never be able to reduce the impact of the automobile on our community and land use.

Saanich has just incorporated a

climate action plan into the Official Community Plan. This particular development does not appear to recognize that climate action is a goal of ours.

While we seem to be pleased with three kilometres of new sidewalks for the whole of Saanich (double the previous year, wow!) we seem to make absolutely no protest over the massive increases in automobile movements caused by developments of 20th-century retail spaces.

I wonder what the road engineering costs (read property taxes) are going to increase by because of the extra wear and tear on our roads.

I am not going to question why Loblaw would want to locate a store here when there are other large similar retail outlets nearby. It is their business plan at the end of the day.

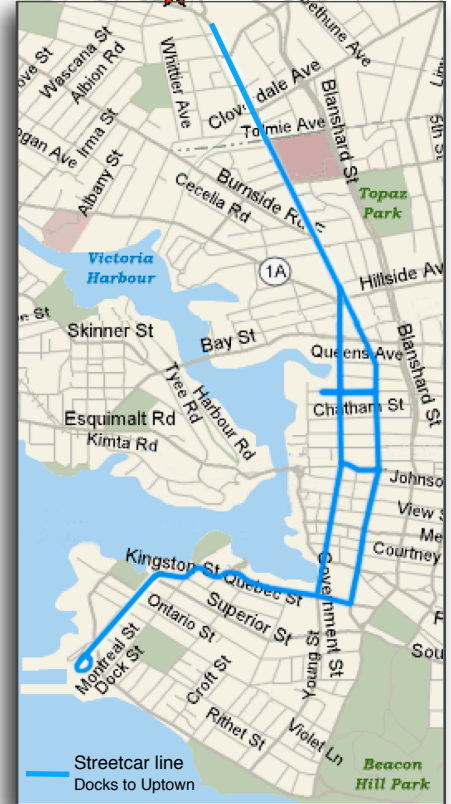
But it would seem to me that the location of this type of business will mostly compete with locally owned businesses that tend to reinvest in the community rather than serve corporate shareholders who live elsewhere.

The more profit that leaves town, the more difficult it will be to achieve any kind of sustainability targets. The economic value to our community of locally owned businesses is far greater than the short-term construction jobs and long-term low-paying retail employment.

Now, it is not proper to complain about something without offering a solution. We are trying to reshape the Douglas and Blanshard corridors to be people places.

While this may take 10 years or more, the first step is to change the transportation system to include an electric trolley line that would lead us to light rail along the Douglas Street right-of-way.

This basic investment will



encourage land use that includes affordable residential. If the residential is allowed to be modestly substantial, say between six and 12 floors, the increase in property tax revenue will more than pay for a free trolley service from downtown to Uptown.

When this was done in Portland, Ore., property developers invested more than \$2 billion in the land within two blocks of the transit corridor.

There is no reason we can't have a Loblaw store, but to move Saanich into the 21st century we need to think creatively. Residential above commercial is very important and this development should not miss opportunity.

We have been ranked as the smartest city in Canada -- so let's go back to the drawing board and rethink this one before it is too late, again!

Rob Wickson is an economic consultant who lives in Saanich and is active in the Gorge Tillicum Community Association.

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Note: Map added to article for clarification