

## **'Heritage' site is sold**

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Developer buys land downtown next to location of waterfront highrise development.

InSight Developments has acquired a key Nanaimo waterfront property adjacent to land where the organization is already building a 24-storey highrise.

Tim Brown recently agreed to sell the Tom Brown's Auto Body property (at 28 Front St.) to the developer of the Longwood and Hawthorne subdivisions.

The purchased lot is about 30 metres by 24 metres, or about 40% of the size of the property where land is being excavated for the 82-unit Seawalk condo tower next door.

While it is in the heart of a city highrise zone, it isn't currently zoned for highrises. The building is also on the city heritage registry.

Doug Bromage, InSight general manager, said the company hasn't decided how it will use the property.

"We thought, when it came on the market, it would be the natural evolution of what we're doing there," said Bromage, who would not divulge the selling price.

"I've actually sworn not to tell anybody, but we paid handsomely," he said. "It's a very privileged location – it's incredible, we've got the waterfront and we've got momentum and we've got the infrastructure in on the first building."

The property butts up against another highrise, being built by Cape Developments. And while it is in one of several areas designated for highrise construction, the land's current zoning only allows for a maximum building height of eight storeys. It would be up to city council to allow a variance to build higher, said Andrew Tucker, city director of community planning.

Bromage won't speculate on whether the company would use the additional land for a second tower.

One thing it will give the developer is more flexibility for its overall design, he said. Another issue is the building's heritage status.

The former gas station, built in 1937, is in what was once the city's main auto sales and service district until the 1960s, said Chris Sholberg, city heritage planner.

"The building is identified as significant in our downtown heritage conservation area, and because it has that status, it does need a heritage alteration permit to alter or demolish it," Sholberg said.

But that didn't stop the demolition of the Global Connections building, to make way for the Seawalk tower.

Sholberg said the most valuable part of the Tom Brown's building is its facade, which features a stylized concrete Texaco logo unique to the period. The city would be interested in any proposal to preserve that aspect of the building.

"We don't necessarily need to see the entire building retained," he said. "We're going to look at whether there's elements of the building that can be conserved."

The building reflects the streamline modern architectural style, which emphasizes curves and horizontal lines and was the first to incorporate electric lighting in its design.

"What we say to the architect, if he can't retain the building or elements of the building, consider the history of the design in your new building," Sholberg said.

Insight takes possession of the building in August. The Seawalk tower will open in the spring of 2010.

DBellaart@nanaimodailynews.com  
250-729-4235

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