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A Housing Project in Victoria That Embraces Nature

By LINDA BAKER

VICTORIA, British Columbia — Rare are the homeowners who welcome a sewage treatment plant in their backyards. But at Docksider Green, a 15-acre mixed-use development being built just north of this city's downtown harbor, neighborhood utilities are less a cause for alarm than part of the amenity package.

"These are our best-selling units," said Joe Van Belleghem, a local developer who won a city-sponsored competition in 2004 to develop [Docksider Green](#). On a recent Friday afternoon, Mr. Van Belleghem was on site, pointing to ground-floor condominiums with decks jutting over a network of ponds and waterways containing native plants, otters and ducks.

The artificial creek circulates wastewater from an adjacent underground sewage treatment plant. That water is also used to flush toilets and irrigate the landscape — a closed system that helps reduce water bills for residents, provides a refuge for wildlife and "improves the marketability of the space," Mr. Van Belleghem said.

"So it's all integrated: the economic, the environmental, the social," he added.

The holistic design is the hallmark of Docksider Green, which will eventually encompass 1.3 million square feet, including 26 buildings and 2,500 residents. The project's first neighborhood, Docksider Wharf, was completed last year and has 266 market-rate apartments, 253 of which have sold; 26 "affordable" units; 32,600 square feet of office space; and 5,881 square feet of retail. Prices range from 411,900 Canadian dollars (about \$390,000) for a one-bedroom to 529,900 for two bedrooms and up to 1,233,900 for penthouses.

The development also includes an 8 million Canadian dollar heating plant that converts locally sourced wood waste into a clean-burning gas that produces all the community's heat and hot water. The system, which eliminates the need to use fossil fuels as a heat source, illustrates Docksider's neighborhood-based approach to environmentally friendly design, said Robert Drew, a project architect and an associate principal with [Busby Perkins & Will](#).

Docksider also reflects Victoria's interest in maintaining the industrial character of the city as it redevelops waterfront land, said Deborah Day, the city's director of planning. "There is an effort to incorporate residential mixed use in balance with preserving a working harbor, which is very much a part of Victoria's tradition and economic engine," she said.

At the southern end of Vancouver Island overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, Victoria, population 330,000, is the capital of British Columbia. A former logging and shipbuilding outpost, the city is known for its large population of retirees and for tourist attractions like the [Fairmont Empress Hotel](#) and the [Royal BC Museum](#).

Less well known is Victoria's "commitment to quality of life," Ms. Day said, adding that Victoria was often overshadowed by its provincial cousin Vancouver when it came to a reputation for innovative urban design.

In that regard, Docksider has been "a bit of a morale boost," Ms. Day said. Last year, the [Clinton Climate Initiative](#) selected Docksider Green as one of the founding "Climate Positive Developments" around the world. The program showcases urban developments that aim for negative carbon emissions. The [Canadian Home Builders' Association](#) also awarded Docksider Green a top honor last year as one of the most innovative projects in [Canada](#).

The story begins in 1989, when the city bought the site, which was contaminated by oil and heavy metals, from the province for a dollar, then outlined a social, economic and environmentally responsible development framework.

Docksider was originally a partnership between the [Windmill Development Group](#), headed by Mr. Van Belleghem, and [Vancity](#), one of Canada's largest credit unions. Mr. Van Belleghem sold his share to Vancity last winter.

Vancity has invested about 70 million Canadian dollars in Docksider Green, according to Tamara Vrooman, Vancity's chief executive. The

project is expected to cost about 500 million Canadian dollars when it is finished.

Among the signs of Dockside's environmental sensibility are rooftop [wind turbines](#) and awnings that double as solar panels. There are also windows that showcase the hustle and bustle outside: kayaks in the harbor, the [Point Hope Shipyard](#) and mountains of rock courtesy of the local asphalt plant.

The [British Columbia Oil and Gas Commission](#) leases 14,000 square feet in one of the commercial buildings. In addition to the project's green features, the commission's staff welcomes Dockside's proximity to downtown and amenities like the more than 30-mile Galloping Goose cycling and pedestrian trail that runs by the development, said Alex Ferguson, the commission's chief executive. He noted that the provincial government required any building it leased to meet LEED gold standards, and that reducing fossil fuel use would also save money.

In February, Scott Wilson, a technical analyst for B. C. Ferries, and Shirley Ronco, a nurse's aide, bought a 1,000-square-foot apartment for 430,000 Canadian dollars. Mr. Wilson said the couple's combined heating and hot water bill for the month of May was 12.66 Canadian dollars. "I thought they made a mistake and left out a zero," he said.

He uses the Galloping Goose trail to walk to work and said he already knew all his neighbors after just a few months.

A passive solar design, fresh air ventilation and efficient appliances help reduce energy use in Dockside Green buildings about 50 percent compared with conventional buildings, Mr. Drew said. Units have sensors that allow residents to monitor daily energy and water use.

Because wood waste is considered a zero emission fuel, Dockside Green residents are not charged a carbon tax for heat and hot water. The provincial tax, among the first of its kind in North America, is about 20 Canadian dollars per ton of carbon dioxide emissions and is set to rise to 30 Canadian dollars per ton by 2012. (The tax typically shows up at the gasoline pump and in utility bills.)

In June, [Dockside Green Energy](#), the utility that operates the thermal plant, began selling excess heating capacity to a nearby hotel, the [Delta Victoria Ocean Pointe Resort Hotel and Spa](#). The deal allows the hotel to idle its natural gas-powered boilers, and Mr. Drew said that was the reason Dockside was considered a carbon positive project.

Several other large projects are in progress in downtown Victoria, including the Atrium, a 200,000-square-foot office building; a homeless shelter; and the Hudson, a mixed-use renovation of a former department store. Over the last 20 years, about 2,000 housing units have also been built on onetime industrial lands, Ms. Day said. Of those revitalization initiatives, Dockside Green comes closest to recreating, in 21st-century form, the city's century-old land-use pattern, she said.

"The history in Victoria has always been that kind of industrial-residential-commercial because we were a port," Ms. Day said. "We evolved away from it, and now we evolved back."