

University proposal under the radar

Community members support concept for more learning opportunities

Published Date: 2007-02-15 Time: 09:50:18

By Alison Taylor

Developers of a proposed private university are quietly testing the waters in the resort to gauge the interest for their proposal in the south end of Whistler.

Last Friday several community members were invited to a meeting with proponents to hear about plans for the university. It was, for the most part, very well received.

"The concept of the university I think could, if it's designed for Whistler, be a tremendous long term asset for us," said Whistler-Blackcomb manager Arthur DeJong. "We need to diversify. I think it's without question, but only in areas that complement being a destination resort and resort community. And a university would only really enhance that in terms of community."

The proponents turned down a request from Pique Newsmagazine for an interview this week and the details of their plan have not been confirmed. There is no formal application for the proposal at municipal hall.

They are, however, linked to the University of Canada West, based out of Victoria.

UCW is a private university, offering undergraduate degrees in several disciplines, from commerce to geography, as well as MBA degrees. It was founded in 2005 and its president, David Strong, was formerly president of the University of Victoria.

Business owner Scott Carrell who was also at Friday's meeting sees a university as the rocket engine that could light a fire under Whistler 2020 — the resort's long-term sustainability plan.

"It would really give a boost to learning in Whistler," said Carrell. "And it would bring in a lot of young people that have interest in what we do."

"I'm a big believer that we need to diversify and we need to find a way to bring young people back to the resort, and people that have the passion for tourism and have the passion for this resort.... I really believe that it could move us forward dramatically."

Among other things, the group discussed the possibility of organizing the university timetable to coincide with Whistler's timetable, giving students the possibility to do work placements during the winter and supplement the local workforce at its peak period.

Another factor discussed at the meeting was the need for the university, which is expected to attract 1,000 students, to be self-contained so that students would not be competing with workers for the limited housing supply.

This isn't the first time a university has been proposed in Whistler.

In the late '90s there were discussions to bring Quest University, now located in Squamish, to the resort. The developers were looking for market bed units in exchange for building the university.

With that in mind Tourism Whistler board chair Rick Clare was looking for a catch at Friday's meeting, and he couldn't find any.

"I couldn't see what they wanted back," he said.

The proponents, he added, aren't looking for any market bed units like Quest.

The plan is to build the university on a portion of the Alpha Creek lands, directly north of Function Junction.

Part of that land has been identified as sensitive wetlands. That was on AWARE President Brad Kasselmann's mind at the meeting.

"There's a lot of great ideas in this proposal and I'm certainly not shy to admit that," he said. "But I have to really, from an AWARE perspective, look at the quality of the building site and question the long-term viability of building such an extensive complex of facilities on that site and its effects on the local environment."

They are some of the last valley bottom wetlands left in Whistler he said and they have an extremely high ecological productivity. As such, AWARE would rather not see that site built on.

Developer John Zen owns the land, which is currently zoned for four single-family homes.

The proponents have suggested the university could be built before the 2010 Winter Olympic and Paralympic Games and could be used for much-needed housing during the Games.