

# **An Open Letter Concerning the Future of Old Town Victoria**

January 17, 2019

For years the City of Victoria has run a very effective program to preserve its heritage character. Yet many of the innovative policies and programs which have been used so successfully in the past are now under excessive and growing pressure, especially in Old Town. As the result of an over-heated real estate market, Old Town is at risk of becoming a victim of otherwise-effective practices taken too far.

Victoria is widely known and admired as a city of exceptional heritage character and charm. Its many historic buildings and districts provide a unique sense of place that makes Victoria a desirable place to live and visit.

The City's multi-faceted approach to heritage conservation has been widely admired and copied. The Victoria Heritage Foundation and the Victoria Civic Heritage Trust have served as models for several similar institutions and programs in other communities in B.C. and beyond. Recognition has also come in the form of a number of awards, most prominently the Prince of Wales Prize in 2001.

Victoria's historic "personality" is best captured in Old Town, the heritage area that lies at the heart of the city's vibrant commercial core. Easily reached on foot from all of the essential tourist facilities, it is frequently cited by visitors as their single most enjoyable experience. Old Town also gives the Capital City a significant advantage in the lucrative conferences and events market.

Old Town is a magnet for locals as well who come for the distinctive shops and restaurants, a boost to commerce that spreads well beyond the boundaries of the heritage area. Increasingly, Victorians also want to live in this district with its unique atmosphere and remarkably contemporary amenities. Old Town may be old, but it is also cool.

City Hall can take much of the credit for the successful preservation of Victoria's distinctive heritage character. An evolving program of initiatives, including grants, tax incentives, and site-specific relaxations of zoning and other regulations, has created a positive environment for the rehabilitation of historic buildings. This is particularly true in Old Town. The result has been a series of highly successful projects in which the private sector, working in close partnership with the City's heritage program, has brought to life the potential of Victoria's historic building stock.

At the heart of Victoria's heritage program is the notion of balance. The City's flexible, site-specific approach to project approval is designed to create conditions that encourage investment in Old Town. On the other hand, heritage policies and guidelines seek to contain and limit the impact of new construction. While the Official Community Plan notes that there is "some capacity" for infill and additions in Old Town, it also states that a key objective of the heritage designation is "to conserve and enhance the heritage value, special character and the significant historic buildings, features and characteristics of this area".

Finding a sustainable balance between rehabilitation and conservation is key.

Of late there have been many signs that the heritage program in Old Town is slipping out of balance. Driven by an over-heated real estate market and a seemingly limitless demand for more residential accommodation, a number of projects in Old Town have come forward to exploit these markets and satisfy the demand.

Typically, these projects combine the rehabilitation of historic properties with new additions and/or free-standing structures. Our concern is that, in return for limited conservation of heritage fabric, these new additions and structures threaten to overwhelm the character of Old Town. Their excessive density and height are well outside the limits set down in the Official

Community Plan and other fundamental planning regulations.

Confronted with unsubstantiated claims by developers of unaffordable costs to rehabilitate heritage properties, Council may be tempted to yield to pressures and permit height and density bonuses that increasingly go well beyond existing regulations. Relaxing established rules to allow additional height and density is a very potent method to boost a project's bottom line. But when granting exceptions to the rules becomes the norm, when every exemption becomes a de facto new baseline for future proposals, there is a real danger of undermining the very strategic goals that the system of policies and regulations was established to achieve. In the case of Old Town, that would mean the loss of unique character by the invasion of a host of over-sized buildings, new towers, and the addition of multiple stories on top of modest heritage buildings, often in return for the retention of mere building façades or other token gestures.

In conclusion, to forestall the irreversible erosion of the character of Old Town, we urge Council to consider the following three recommendations:

1. Respect the 3-1 floor space ratio and 15-metre height limit in Old Town, as mandated by the Official

Community Plan and Downtown Core Area Plan. While exceptions may on occasion be legitimate, exceptions to rules should not become the rule

2. When considering requests for the relaxation of regulations or applications for rezoning, require the submission and third party review of a development pro forma to back any claims of financial need

3. Support the maximum retention of historic structures and fabric, in preference to “facadism” and similar token measures of conservation

## Signatures

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