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Ottawa*Watch* 314: A fast trip through the far west

By Lloyd Mackey

This piece was written two years before we “retired” from Ottawa and returned, ourselves, to the “left coast”. In the eight plus years we have been back, the City Centre has continued to produce new towers at a steady pace.

I should note that the Centre is sub-divided two ways. One concentrates high rise development around three SkyTrain stations – Gateway, Surrey Central and King George, as well as around Surrey Memorial Hospital. The other is by designating names to areas in the centre – one of which is described as the Whalley Historic District.

Marvin Hunt, for his part, went on to be a BC Liberal member of the provincial legislature. He was defeated in the NDP edgeout of three years ago but continues to play a significant role in Surrey civic life

Last week was travel time. So, the “left coast” and “redneck” Alberta are the two focal points of today’s and next week’s *OttawaWatch*.

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The “left coast” is what Canada’s west coast is considered to be, by those who observe British Columbia’s occasional penchant for harbouring left-leaning governments, big labour unions and counter-culturists of all sizes and shapes.

It has also harboured Edna and me during much of our 42 years of marriage. We were back there, early last week, to check out the neighbourhood in which our second little condominium is ensconced.

That neighbourhood used to be Whalley, a historically-scrappy enclave in the north part of Surrey. Whalley was perched on a ridge overlooking the Fraser River, across from New Westminster. Now it is Surrey City Centre, a rapidly emerging regional town centre for 400,000 of people living south of the Fraser and north of the US-Canadian boundary.

The West Whalley Ring Road is now University Drive, lined with maturing trees and slender condo towers, leading to the Simon Fraser University Surrey campus.

The seamier side of Whalley – ugly strip malls, seedy hotels and the occasional hooker – is receding.

Across the street from the university is a newly-opened state-of-the-art central library. As I stood looking out of one of its three-storey windows, Councillor Marvin Hunt, was my

guide. A former – and still ordained – evangelical minister, Hunt works full time at civic politics and is a networker *extraordinaire*.

I wanted to know what the big hole in the ground beside the library was supposed to be.

“The parking garage for the new City Hall,” he replied.

And what will be on top of the garage?

“That will be the civic plaza. It will have room for 5,000 people, for concerts, community gatherings, what have you.”

Previous councils had a hard time selling the City Centre concept. The private sector was, quite rightly so, suggesting that the politicians and bureaucrats were breaking their promises, making it hard for the corporate types to do their part in building community.

Hunt points out that, under Dianne Watts’ energetic mayoralty, the city is taking the lead on much of the core community development and subsequently turning over the appropriate parts to the private and non-profit sectors to continue the task. It means that faith-based groups have excellent opportunities to extend their outreaches and community service.

That was one of the reasons for building a central library as a major anchor for the city core. I said earlier that it was “state of the art”. But it also has a humanizing element, as well.

That means it will be possible for groups of people to “borrow” a person – a speaker with particular expertise with community involvement – to meet with them. An increasing number of libraries are using this approach to make their facilities more “people-oriented.”

Interestingly, just a few metres away, across the street, is a long-established Lutheran church, with both an English and Chinese congregation. They are part of the community.

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My hope, in the next few months, is to take a look at what is happening in cities across Canada – not excluding Ottawa – to build on the foundations provided by faith, community, corporate and political movements. What is happening in Surrey represents just one such example. Stay tuned.

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Next week, I will have something to say about our stop off in Edmonton where the story of what happened with Ted Byfield and Preston Manning 25 years ago was played out in a celebratory “Report Reunion” event.

The “Report” in question was the *Report* group of magazines that Byfield ran for many years, drawing heavily from the strong Christian roots that were part of the Byfield family tradition. The reunion included the *Report* journalists who were working there in the fall of 1986. That is when a string of developments brought Byfield and Manning – *Report* and Reform, if you like – together in a carefully woven common cause, based, again, in part, on Christian faith and values. As Providence would have it, I was one of those people involved with *Report* for a brief four months, during a “sabbatical” from the Christian newspaper development work which involved three decades of my life.

In short, the reason for celebration, in the view of the Report Reunion celebrants, was that, as of May, 2011, -- 25 years later – “the West is finally in.”

There is more to it, of course, and we will touch on that in seven days.

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