



2009 | Residential Development

Resort Municipality of Whistler

British Columbia

Population: 9,248



Cheakamus Crossing Legacy Neighbourhood

Summary

In preparation for the 2010 Olympics, the Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) built a temporary athletes' village which will be converted into a sustainable, compact, pedestrian-oriented community after the Olympics. Covenants will ensure that 90 per cent of the development is used to house local residents, and will restrict prices to allow a diverse mix of inhabitants and increase affordable housing in the area. The development incorporates a district-based alternative energy system, innovative stormwater management systems, a car-share program, public transit access and a commuter trail network. With its new district energy system, the neighbourhood will emit 3,000 fewer tonnes of greenhouse gases (GHGs) than a conventionally supplied development. The athletes' village site, due to be completed in fall 2009, will be returned to the municipality in May 2010, following the games, and will quickly be modified into a permanent residential neighbourhood with 276 new affordable housing units (221 ownership and 55 rental units), all of which will achieve a high EnerGuide rating of 83.

Background

Although it maintains a permanent population of fewer than 10,000 people, the Resort Municipality of Whistler swells to an average daily population of over 28,000 (including residents, visitors and employees) thanks to its status as one of Canada's premier ski and recreation destinations. In preparation for Whistler's role as a major venue for the 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games, the Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC) needed to plan the development of an athletes' village. While the games venue agreement between VANOC and Whistler made provisions for a temporary athletes' village, the bidding process led to an idea to create an Olympic and Paralympic village that could also provide permanent, sustainable residential housing for the community once the games are over.

Whistler has continually struggled to maintain a sufficient supply of quality, affordable housing within the community. High house prices and property taxes have put home ownership beyond the reach of most people who work in the community, with 43 per cent of permanent residents spending more than 30 per cent of their gross income on housing costs. The average purchase price of a condominium in 2006 was \$608,620, while the average price of a single-family residence was \$1.82 million.

Whistler2020, a comprehensive sustainability plan adopted in 2004 as the community's highest level planning policy, established a target of housing 75 per cent of Whistler employees within municipal boundaries. The Cheakamus Crossing neighbourhood was designed to address this community need through its resident-restricted housing inventory, while also supporting other Whistler2020 priorities such as containing new development within the existing corridor.

Project Development

Building on funding provided for the temporary athletes' village, Whistler elected to assume the risk of developing a permanent residential neighbourhood. The RMOW created the Whistler 2020 Development Corporation (WDC) to avoid the costs of transferring the project to a developer, thus ensuring delivery of the project at cost. The WDC facilitated the development process, helped manage risks and leveraged internal and external collaboration.

The RMOW also established an athletes' village secretariat, with representation from each municipal department. The secretariat took responsibility for developing design guidelines, preparing the master plan, rezoning the lands and approving the specifications of the new development. Secretariat meetings dealt comprehensively with planning, engineering, building, landscaping, recreation, community facility needs and legal matters through an integrated design

process — a collaborative and interactive process that treats the development as one interdependent system rather than a number of separate systems.

The Province of British Columbia transferred approximately 135 hectares of provincial crown land to the RMOW to provide a site for the athletes' village and subsequent residential housing. Agreements were also signed with the Squamish and Lil'wat Nations, because the Cheakamus Crossing neighbourhood is being developed within their traditional territories. BC Hydro provided energy planning guidance, while a memorandum of understanding between the RMOW and Terasen Energy Services facilitated the assessment of the future neighbourhood's integrated district-based alternative energy system.

Project Implementation

The Cheakamus Crossing site was selected in 2003–2004 as part of the Whistler2020 sustainability planning exercise. The site selection process involved extensive public consultation. Residents and stakeholders emphasized that any new development should be located within the valley's existing urban footprint and should focus on providing housing for local residents, both key tenets of the Whistler2020 community sustainability plan. The Cheakamus Crossing neighbourhood design is also consistent with Whistler2020 strategies regarding energy, water, transportation, resident housing and the built environment. In developing the neighbourhood, Whistler has fully or partially completed 11 actions recommended by the Whistler2020 community task force.

The development was also guided by other municipal policy documents, such as Whistler's 2010 winter games strategic framework; its green building policy; and its integrated energy, air quality and greenhouse gas management plan. In addition, the development was influenced by Whistler's ongoing participation in the FCM-ICLEI Partners for Climate Protection (PCP) program.

The Whistler 2020 Development Corporation managed the development process and ensured that innovative sustainability components were incorporated in a cost-effective way. All buildings incorporate green building systems and were designed for conversion from athlete accommodations to residential housing. The development includes a district energy system that is built, governed and operated by a new neighbourhood energy utility. The site uses rain gardens as part of an innovative stormwater management system.

Many of the results from these combined measures are tracked and monitored through the LEED for Neighbourhood Development (LEED-ND) reporting structure, and have been evaluated by the Canada Green Building Council. With the help of consultants, the municipality was able to model the GHG reduction performance of the district energy system and compare it to both electric baseboard and natural gas baselines. The neighbourhood design is oriented toward public transit, accommodating efficient bus routes and an infrastructure of pedestrian and cycling pathways. These measures, as well as Cheakamus Crossing's location within the existing developed corridor, serve to limit transportation-related emissions.

The RMOW, Whistler Housing Authority (WHA) and WDC engaged the community throughout the planning and design process by holding multiple workshops, collaborative design sessions and site tours. The municipality presented the project internally to local community groups, at various conferences throughout the province, and at the FCM Sustainable Communities Mission in Whistler. These presentations were designed to communicate and share the details of the project with other communities and stakeholders.

Open houses have been held over the past three years to inform the broader community about Cheakamus Crossing and to spark interest in residential ownership. The WHA maintains a waiting list of 800 households that have been pre-approved to purchase one of Whistler's resident-restricted properties, and Cheakamus Crossing is the preferred housing location for about 500 of these households. The WHA and WDC send out regular information and progress reports, via email, to applicants on the WHA waiting list.

All the 221 townhomes and condominiums in Cheakamus Crossing will be sold prior to the Olympic games to residents on the WHA waiting list. All units are price-restricted at the time of purchase, to about 40 per cent of the cost of a comparable unrestricted market property. The resale price is limited by a maximum appreciation rate equivalent to the Core Consumer Price Index. There will also be 55 affordable rental units. When completed, the neighbourhood will also include commercial and recreational space and two hostels.

Results

- The neighbourhood's district energy system will emit 90 per cent fewer GHGs and common air contaminants than a baseline natural gas forced air system, according to joint assessments by the municipality and private sector consultants.
- Two hundred and seventy-six new affordable housing units will be built.
- All units in the development are expected to achieve an EnerGuide rating of 83, thereby designating Cheakamus Crossing a BC Hydro Power Smart neighbourhood.
- WDC hired local tradespersons, contractors and consultants during the construction process, thereby supporting the local labour market.
- Cheakamus Crossing contributed substantially to the inventory of affordable housing in the community. Largely as a result of the WHA's residential housing program, 79 per cent of Whistler employees live within municipal boundaries. This limits the economic and environmental costs associated with commuting.

Lessons Learned

- **ACTIVELY ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY.** The challenges of price-restricted housing include lack of familiarity with the model, neighbourhood "NIMBYism," and attempts by sellers to obtain higher returns on investment. These challenges can be overcome through community engagement activities that explain the community's strategic plan and vision for the future. Because Whistler engaged the local community, Cheakamus Crossing did not encounter the problems often associated with price-restricted projects. To date, over 90 per cent of the resident- and price-restricted units have been sold through pre-sales.
- **ORGANIZE EVENTS TO BUILD PUBLIC SUPPORT.** The community engagement process successfully built public support for the project through events such as open houses, site tours and presentations to local community groups. A naming competition, through which the name Cheakamus Crossing was chosen, helped foster a connection with the local community. This connection was further enhanced by a "meet your neighbours" event that was held once 90 per cent of the units had been sold.
- **DRAW ON PRIVATE-SECTOR EXPERTISE.** The involvement of the private sector through the WDC provided expertise that enhanced the design and development process.
- **CREATE GUIDANCE TOOLS AND FRAMEWORK DOCUMENTS.** The successful development of the athletes' village and future neighbourhood depended on guidance tools such as Whistler2020, the 2010 winter games strategic framework and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) with partner organizations.

Related and Future Initiatives

The complex and urgent nature of the Cheakamus Crossing project necessitated better integration of Whistler2020 strategies into staff reporting templates. As a result, the template for administrative reports to council was permanently modified to include a detailed Whistler2020 lens, thus ensuring that sustainability goals are constantly factored into municipal decision-making.

The Cheakamus Crossing development also led to the closure of an adjacent landfill site. The cap and capture project has reduced CO₂-equivalent landfill gas emissions by about 15,000–20,000 tonnes annually. The municipality plans to reclaim the site for use as playing fields.

Partners and Collaboration

Whistler Housing Authority

Terasen Energy Services

BC Hydro

FCM/ICLEI's Partners for Climate Protection (PCP) program

Province of British Columbia

Squamish and Lil'wat Nations

Canada Green Building Council

Vancouver Organizing Committee (VANOC)

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Photo Information

Photo Caption: The athletes' village is being constructed according to the most exacting green building standards, and portions of it will be easy to convert into townhomes following the games.

Photo Credit: Resort Municipality of Whistler