

## The Express route to tapping tourism growth Valley undergoes a mini hotel boom with the latest project featuring a new Holiday Inn

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Comox Valley Echo

*Friday, July 04, 2008*

There may be concerns across Canada that the booming tourism business shows signs of faltering, with the dollar exchange rate, high price of gas and new border documentation requirements deterring travel from the lucrative U.S. market.

But you wouldn't think so in the Comox Valley, where no fewer than six new hotel projects are either under construction or going through the planning process.

Together they could add almost 400 new hotel rooms to Courtenay and Comox within the next two or three years - a huge leap in the capacity of the area to host both vacationers and business visitors.

Of the projects already underway, two - the Old House Village Suites Phase Two and the Best Western Westerly Hotel expansion - will both also offer new high-end spa facilities.

### CATERING TO TWO NICHES

The new Holiday Inn Express on Cliffe Avenue is carving out a different niche, investing in a smart hotel to appeal to families as well as working business visitors.

For families, its amenities will include an indoor pool with two-storey high waterslides and a huge hot-tub; a picnic and play area alongside the Courtenay Riverway; and dedicated storage facilities for snowboards and skis for those planning trips to Mount Washington.

And for commercial visitors, about a third of its 91 rooms will be set out as suites with floor plans devised so guests can host formal business meetings without their visitors even catching a glimpse of the sleeping quarters.

Wireless internet access is being provided throughout the hotel and there will be flat-screen TVs, microwaves and refrigerators in every room - and do-it-yourself laundry facilities on site for those who need them.

With hot competition for bookings likely, the Holiday Inn Express is hoping to make its mark by providing quality facilities at what developer and project manager Scott Butler described as "great value prices."

Details are still being worked out, but the whole hotel is designed to run with minimal staff to keep overheads down so, for example, the only food available will be hot breakfast each morning, which will be included in the room rate.

There are, of course, several restaurants and fast-food outlets nearby for those seeking other meals, and the idea of a new diner on an adjacent site is currently under consideration.

### BEHIND THE PROJECT

Butler has been closely involved with other recent developments in the Valley, most notably the nearby Tides condominium project and its newly-launched neighbour, The Riverstone, on which construction will start soon.

For the Holiday Inn Express project, Scott (32) and his older brother Matt put up the initial money to get the project rolling, having convinced themselves that the Comox Valley offered

real potential for such a hotel.

They pitched their idea to the Holiday Inn company, which supported their analysis and decided they wanted one of their new-style properties on this part of the Island.

Thirty-eight-year-old Matt is now hands-on president of Traine Construction, which is building the new hotel, so together the two brothers are now turning their dream to reality.

To fund the \$10 million project, Bayview Hotels Group Ltd was formed between Scott, Keith Bryant and Don Bell.

Bryant is currently president of Hospitality Inns Ltd of Calgary and has a background in hotel ownership and management. His company will run the new Holiday Inn Express, with Marc Rheaume being the man in charge.

#### WESTJET FOUNDER INVESTS

Bell is perhaps best known as one of the co-founders of WestJet, and was executive vice-present of the airline until his retirement from the company a year ago.

He became an even bigger fan of the Comox Valley after WestJet introduced its direct flights to and from Calgary and Edmonton, and now has significant investments in the area.

Those flights may well bring in some of the visitors the new hotel will be seeking.

#### OPENING IN 2009

"We plan to have the hotel open by early 2009," said Scott Butler. "I am convinced the Valley needs a new, smart, good value hotel and that's what we will be providing."

He is enthused about the site, which used to house a used car dealership, workwear store and the local Taekwando club.

"It's very visible alongside the highway, yet it looks out over the river and estuary at the back.

"There are some great views, particularly from the higher floors," he pointed out on a site tour.

#### MANY 'GREEN' FEATURES

He is also proud of the environmental features that are being incorporated in the project, way above the usual requirements.

"We've looked for every way to incorporate energy-efficient features, like low-e windows filled with argon gas, heat pumps, and LED lights above room doors," he explained.

"This is not only good for the environment, but also makes sense financially.

"In fact we have incorporated so many energy-saving features into the hotel we're getting a B.C. Hydro rebate!

"We've also installed an underground rainwater collection tank that will provide for all our landscaping irrigation, which helps address the concerns about high water use locally."

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CLOSE WINDOW

