

SULLIVAN: Welcome to this great untamed wilderburb

Paul Sullivan / Contributing writer

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It takes a lot to get me going these days, but the approval of a new home for the North Vancouver museum on Esplanade has me bouncing around like a little kid on candy.

It looked as if the museum was doomed to remain a pipe dream when City of North Vancouver council rejected the museum's plans to move itself into the Pipe Shop, that odd facility on the waterfront near Lonsdale Quay. I say odd, because if that's not a museum, what is it?

Never mind. The museum is destined for a new home in a Polygon condo development on Esplanade. Where would we be without condo developers? (Amusing retort goes here).

It's hardly a done deal, and the scheduled opening isn't until 2019, but the museum people are already starting to dream big, with plans for a touring exhibit on Chief Dan George, the only member of the Tsleil-Waututh Nation ever nominated for an Oscar. (Quick: 1970, who won? Answer at the bottom of this column.)

I'm also intrigued by the museum's focus on North Vancouver as a "wilderburb." No, that's not an imaginary beast from Harry Potter, but a term referring to a suburb bordering on wilderness, which certainly describes the North Shore. Just ask North Shore Rescue, which is constantly trying to remind people that nature bites.

I'm not 100 per cent sure who coined the term, but it's the subject of a book by Lincoln Bramwell, the Chief Historian of the USDA Forest Service. *Wilderburbs, Communities on Nature's Edge* examines four communities in the U.S. West in California, Colorado, Utah and New Mexico, where people relinquish easy proximity to a major city in return for a wilderness in their backyard.

But there's nothing like the North Shore among Bramwell's wilderburbs. When (as if) traffic is light, it's a 10-minute commute to a city of 2.5-million people, but it backs against a wilderness that runs all the way to Alaska. And it's not just any wilderness, but one of the last great temperate rainforests on Earth, harbouring trees 1,000 years old.

The wilderness-urban interface is nothing new – 99 million people in the U.S. live next to a wilderness area. But you'd be hard-pressed to find another place like the North Shore, sandwiched between so much city and so much wilderness. It's only right that our wilderburbs status should be a major focus for the new museum.

I realize there are many other threads woven into the tapestry of the North Shore, starting with Chief Dan George and the Tsleil-Waututh and the Squamish Nations, followed by George Vancouver, the sulphur pile and the Tomahawk Barbeque. But the wilderness-urban interface defines us.

We're all in this together, whether we like it or not. So often, we default to our differences, and there are plenty of them. But unlike most places on the planet that have been tamed, the great rainforest next door lays down some rules we need to obey.

Maybe someday civilization will cap Cypress, Grouse and Seymour, but there's always another mountain, higher and mightier, to make us humble. And there are many other opportunities for us to learn humility.

For example, our only practical option for expansion is toward Squamish, or up. It's a geographical imperative that will rule our future development, unlike Regina which has lots of room to grow if it should ever threaten to do so.

That means we have to learn how to work together, and good luck with that.

Speaking of living and working together: Most suburbs have problems with raccoons and rats; on the North Shore, we've got bears. When your neighbour weighs an average of 400 pounds and likes to rummage around in your garbage, it taxes your social skills. Unfortunately, it often ends with a bullet for the bear. Maybe we should start tranquilizing homeowners who leave their garbage unprotected. What?

There are so many other challenges that go with being a wilderburbs, from potential forest fires to driveways that double as bobsled runs, but they're all worth it.

There's no place like the North Shore, and finally, we get to celebrate it in style.

Answer to skill-testing Oscar question: John Mills for Ryan's Daughter.

Journalist and communications consultant Paul Sullivan has been a North Vancouver resident since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the rise of Madonna. p.sullivan@breakthroughpr.com

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