



WELCOME GATE BY JAMES HARRY AT THE HEADLAND.
PHOTO CREDIT:
TRACEY L'ESPÉRANCE

FEATURE

Cultural Restoration

Community visions collaborate to reclaim cherished landscape.

By Justin Hains and Tracey L'Espérance



STANTEC DIVER PREPARING FOR
SEDIMENT SAMPLING IN HOWE SOUND.
PHOTO CREDIT: CONOR MCCRACKEN

LOCATED AT THE CONFLUENCE of mountains and ocean, Squamish, B.C. is surrounded by a breathtaking backdrop in an area renowned for its trails, adventure sports, and diverse wildlife populations. Coupled with the thriving art and culture scene, Squamish is growing.

Starting in the 1960s, a mercury cell chlor-alkali plant operated on the Oceanfront Peninsula just south of downtown Squamish. It produced caustic soda, hydrochloric acid, and chlorine for the pulp and paper industry. The historical plant operations resulted in the release and deposition of mercury contamination from the plant's chemical manufacturing processes. After the plant ceased operations in the 1990s, the province of British Columbia ordered remediation which resulted in significant remedial excavation programs, and a Certificate of Compliance (Certificate) for residential use issued in 2005 for one-third of the land. An Approval-in-Principle was issued for the remaining lands and included long-term monitoring of the site.

For decades, the Oceanfront Peninsula remained off limits to the waterfront community of Squamish who had limited direct local access to Howe Sound. But in 2004, the lands were transferred to the District of Squamish and a master plan for the redevelopment of the plant area was created.

In addition to residential and commercial property, the redevelopment plans included a park, protection of the shoreline’s ecological values, boat launches and safe public access to the shoreline.

Jump ahead two decades and a remarkable transformation is taking place at this former brownfield site. The project is called Oceanfront Squamish, a 60-acre project that is a collaboration between developer Matthews West, Squamish Nation, and the District of Squamish. A vibrant extension of downtown Squamish, the master-planned development pushes past the typical definition of mixed-use to bring residents and businesses together with shopping, light industry, offices, maker spaces, public parks and trails. The development will eventually bring 2,500 new homes for 7,000 residents and 2,500 jobs to the former brownfield site.

In 2024, Sp’akw’us Feather Park was awarded a Brownie Award in the category of Re-strategize: Partnerships and Community Engagement.

Sp’akw’us Feather Park

The first initiative of the redevelopment was the creation of a waterfront park to indefinitely protect long-awaited access to Howe Sound, and in

August 2024, Oceanfront Squamish reached its inaugural milestone with the grand opening of Sp’akw’us Feather Park. While this major milestone has been achieved, it was not without decades of planning, starting with a strong foundation of community engagement, consultation, and policy work.

At 11 acres and with an integration of Squamish Nation art and culture, Sp’akw’us Feather Park is built over the newly reclaimed peninsula shoreline. The transition from a brownfield to new park took years of dedicated collaboration between a team of environmental consultants, the municipality and other stakeholders. The District formed the Squamish Oceanfront Development Corporation (SODC) to create a master plan for the redevelopment of the plant area. Through a community envisioning process, a Sub Area Plan was created specifically for the Oceanfront Peninsula that would guide redevelopment of the former industrial lands.

The SODC formed a steering committee of land development experts, which

TAKE A TOUR OF
SP’AKW’US FEATHER PARK



SP'AKW'US FEATHER PARK
GRAND OPENING, AUGUST 2024.
PHOTO CREDIT: JONATHAN EVANS

secured brownfields funding from the province to advance additional environmental investigations and provincial brownfields funding and Green Municipal Fund grants to decommission former plant infrastructure for productive reuse. The District and SODC funded several investigations and environmental monitoring programs with ongoing reporting requirements to the B.C. Ministry of Environment and Parks (ENV). Following these initiatives, the site was successfully rezoned and subdivided into a mixed-use development, reflecting the desire of the community for a revitalized waterfront.

In 2016, Matthews West Developments acquired the Oceanfront Peninsula lands through an extensive proposal process, and in recognition of the community vision that accompanied them. In partnership with the Squamish Nation and the District, Matthews West commenced construction on the site in 2018.

Keys to success

After Matthews West acquired the land, the company subsequently engaged Stantec's environmental services team to complete environmental site investigations and detailed human health and ecological risk

assessments to fulfill regulatory requirements and ensure that risks to people and the environment were being effectively mitigated.

One of the primary keys to success was to follow a risk assessment-based approach driven by sound science, aiming to achieve ENV's targets. Another key to success was the lifting of the Remediation Order — a rare achievement that enabled the pursuit of Certificates of Compliance and therefore property redevelopment.

Remediation risk innovation

One of the major remediation focuses was to eliminate exposure pathways of human and ecological receptors to mercury in the environment. Tracking, predicting, and assessing the risks of the various forms of mercury requires a rigorous scientific approach combined with creative insights for data collection and evaluation.

The Stantec team of toxicologists, scientists, and engineers worked closely to investigate the mercury distribution and behaviour, remediating the residual mercury contamination through detailed risk assessment using risk mitigation and robust environmental management

plans. Stantec experts collaborated with external scientists and regulators to develop precise field sampling techniques and site-specific acceptable limits based on de novo toxicity reference values, while coordinating with international laboratories to ensure compliance and efficacy.

Stantec's team completed investigations, risk assessment, and obtained a Certificate for the site's first building lot, which includes a presentation center and brewery. Additionally, Stantec completed the risk assessment that led to the opening of the Sp'akw'us Feather Park.

How the park's vision came together

The park was envisioned by the community and created in collaboration with countless community members including the Squamish Nation elders, youth, and cultural knowledge holders. Collaboration and support from Squamish Nation and Sk̓wx̓wú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish People) into the design of Sp'akw'us Feather Park showcases their culture and ongoing presence as stewards of this territory.

Collaboration with the project ethnobotanist and the Squamish Nation was

pivotal to the ecological and cultural restoration of Sp'akw'us Feather Park. This included the construction of a root garden to pay respect to the Indigenous traditional agricultural practices, designed to capture tidal debris that nourishes perennial roots for consumption, which both enhances environmental sustainability and serves to preserve and share the cultural practices of the region. The park is a genuine step in acknowledging Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw as stewards of the land through the presence of their culture, knowledge, and teachings woven into the selection of artworks, design of the playground, cultural gardens, and plantings with the community at large.

The park also included input from the adventure sports community, environmental groups, artists, trail societies, as well as much public input over the years. As a result, the park boasts two beaches and watersport launch sites, a restored saltwater marsh bench, open lawn space for community festivals and events, washrooms, an Indigenous designed and themed playground, public art from local Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, slacklines and more.

Sp'akw'us Feather Park stands as a generous gift to the community of Squamish, offering a beautiful, inclusive space for everyone to enjoy.

Next phases

Going forward, Stantec continues to support Matthews West with pursuing Certificates across the entire Oceanfront Squamish lands as development progresses, including with environmental site investigations, human health ecological risk assessments, support with ground improvements in mercury-affected areas, contract administration, environmental monitoring. The next redevelopment parcels slated for development will include a public sailing center, float plane terminal, and the first residences and works facilities.

Although Matthews West, the Squamish Nation, and the District of Squamish have come a long way on the project, redevelopment continues. However, it is evident that the ongoing transformation is the tangible culmination of stakeholders including landowners, municipal government, provincial government, and the Squamish Nation productively working together to achieve a shared vision.

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