

FEATURE Big retailers are staking out Langley Township as a prime Metro shopping destination

Giants shop Langley

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Last month's grand opening of Qualico's Willoughby Town Centre would be big news in any city, but for the Township of Langley it's just another signal the fast-growing suburb is maturing into a major retail destination for the Lower Mainland.

Willoughby has nine distinct phases, the first three comprising retail and office space and 65 residential units either completed or under construction. At build out the centre will boast about 100,000 square feet of retail space and up to 1,200 homes according to Hugh Carter, vice-president of community and commercial development with Qualico.

Carter says the 20-acre Langley site represents a "a rare opportunity" to develop an entire community with a "walkable" retail village at its core.

"Langley's growing population and the demand that this places on local services presented us with the opportunity to replicate our success of developing communities within communities," he explained.

The centre's September 21 opening celebrated the first phase of the 'High Street,' which includes not only big brands like **Loblaws**, **Shoppers** and **RBC Financial**, but homegrown storefronts such as **Noma Sushi**, **Mattu's Coffee and Tea** and **Town Centre Liquor**. The eclectic mix of big and small is no accident.

"This is a community, not a regional, retail centre," Carter said, comparing it to "lifestyle



Photos: Qualico

The first phase of Willoughby Town Centre opened last month in the Township of Langley, with a "High Street" of retail and a condominium complex. When complete, it will include 100,000 square feet of retail and up to 1,200 homes.

centres" like South Surrey's Morgan Crossing and Park Royal South in West Vancouver.

Others may see the township, named one of the top western Canadian cities for real estate investors by *Western Investor* and the **Real Estate Investment Network**, as a regional shopping centre.

Outlet coming in?

Rumours are swirling that a large, U.S.-based retail developer is planning a mega-outlet shopping centre near 200th Street and Highway 1 at the commercial heart of the township. Insiders say the developer persuaded the township that it could be developed without adding to traffic woes at one of the busiest interchanges in the Lower Mainland.

Township zoning now allows for a large outlet centre, but the developer has yet to step forward.

The 200th Street intersection would appear to be an "excellent location" for a large, outlet-style mall, says **Ian Thomas**, president of **Thomas Consultants**, adding that outlet centres are currently "the darling segment" of the retail industry.

Pointing to the success of such centres in Toronto and Washington state, Thomas says Langley Township has the right formula of a large catchment area and excellent access along a major highway.

When **Premium Outlets** – a joint venture of **Simon Property Group** and **Calloway Real Estate Investment Trust** – opened

Greater Toronto's first mega outlet mall at Halton Hills August 1, it drew long lines of shoppers before the doors even opened.

Outlet centres differ from other retail in that they attract brand-name manufacturers offering merchandise marked down 30 to 60 per cent.

Gary McKinnon, economic development officer for the Township of Langley, confirmed the outlet-centre zoning is in place but couldn't provide any negotiation details.

But, he noted, top-tier U.S. retailers are already moving into the area, including **Target**, **Army & Navy**, **Olive Garden** and **Harley Davidson**. According to McKinnon, "Langley appears to be the testing ground for unique types of stores."

Building boom

Even without a big new shopping centre, the township is seeing strong commercial construction. In the first seven months of this year total commercial building permits reached \$24.6 million, well above the five-year annual pace of \$21 million.

But another number may be as important to retail developers: new-home construction in the first seven months of this year totalled \$200 million as more than 620 new homes broke ground in the township.

Such residential growth is attracting the attention of big institutional investors. Just this spring, **Manulife Real Estate** bought the 91,517-square-foot Aldergrove Village Shopping Centre in the township for just under \$30 million.

More recently, **Dean LaPointe** of **Coldwell Bankers** confirmed two separate developers are inking deals to buy a 34-acre parcel of land along the 200th Street Corridor in the township, directly across from the Langley Events Centre. ♦