

Resistance is Futile: Steveston, Developers, PR flacks, and the Borg

by kevin harding - Monday, April 07, 2014

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The idyllic town of Steveston, located at the western tip of Richmond, is the site of what appears to be a battle for the ages: the City Council is facing an invasion of [the Borg](#) as they debate what to do with a developer's plans for an historic district along the waterfront.



Yes, the Borg. Those *Star Trek* baddies who are part-human, mostly-machine who invade, who tell you in a terrifying voice that "Resistance is futile," who ignore the fact that you just want to get on with your own life, and who assimilate you - forcibly make you be part of their plans, and do their bidding.

They're pretty awesome villains on TV, and while Steveston isn't actually facing an invasion of robots who want to take over your life, they're facing a foe that's pretty comparable.

Enter [Onni](#). Onni is a real-estate development company. In Vancouver, that's pretty much tantamount to the Borg. And Onni is making their stand in Steveston at Imperial Landing, a stretch of newly-developed land along what used to be the BC Packer's fishing land and cannery alongside the Fraser River in Steveston. And they want you to comply with their wishes, and they won't take no for an answer. Resistance is futile.

[According to Onni's website, Imperial Landing is a mixed-use community, featuring residential suites above "60,000 square feet of retail space."](#) However, if you were to visit Imperial Landing right now, you wouldn't know it, because the bottoms of these new fancy residential suites are all empty.

"Empty?" You might ask. Why would valuable retail space alongside a waterfront in Vancouver be empty? A very good question.

It turns out that Richmond's City Council wanted to preserve the character of the property that was up for development when BC Packers - the fishing and canning company - sold the land. So they zoned it ["Mixed Maritime Use"](#) - a land-use decision that intended to preserve the character of the area by restricting it to maritime-related uses, like fish markets, boat supplies and services, offices, and the like. They did this a long time ago.

But Onni didn't like this. [According to documents before the Richmond City Council's Planning Committee](#), Onni has been, for some time, trying hard to convince Richmond to re-zone their land so that they can do more than just maritime related uses.

Richmond has so far said no - they have wanted to preserve the land for maritime uses. It's a valid choice that the Council - democratically elected - has made. And in our society, that's generally something to be respected.

But again, Onni won't take no for an answer. Resistance is futile.

Onni went and built their Imperial Landing in the mixed maritime use land zone. They're relatively pretty buildings, all new and shiny. [And despite Onni arguing since at least 2007 that the mixed maritime use zone was economically unfeasible](#) - they built them anyways.

And now that Onni claims that because they haven't been able to find tenants to fill their mixed maritime retail spaces, they should be allowed to rezone them for broader retail uses. In effect, Onni wants to do an end-run around the planning process after they've been denied so many times.

Someone named Bob Ransford is leading a PR campaign on social media to support their desires to do just that. He's a local Steveston resident, PR person who works for real estate developers amongst other clients, and principal of [Counterpoint Communications](#). He's tweeting doomsday messages about the upcoming decision - in his words, surely [only a sadistic City Council would allow such beautiful buildings to go unfilled](#). If you read his tweets, you'd think that Steveston were facing economic collapse if these buildings weren't immediately rezoned and leased out to the highest bidder.

Bob Ransford insists that he's doing this out of the goodness of his own heart. Which is probably a good thing, because if he were being paid by Onni to do this work, they might want to revisit his instructions.

Here's one of his recent tweets. See if you can spot the problem, and the Borg-ness of Onni's demand to Richmond City council:



See the problem? Let's go back to the current zoning of the land: mixed maritime use. For maritime related businesses and offices. How could, then, Onni *purpose build a cafe* in a maritime use?

Here's where the Borg come in. Remember, resistance is futile.

The process to get a construction permit in Richmond is apparently a quick review to ensure that your proposed building meets the zone in "character and form," ie, that it isn't completely out of whack. Since these are buildings to be leased, their use is flexible - they're effectively empty shells waiting to be filled in.

This is a loophole - obviously, the assumption that you will get a development permit for a building that suits the zone and then use it for those purposes. I suspect that the grand strategists at Onni saw an opportunity - while they had been arguing for some time that mixed maritime was economically unfeasible, they'd build buildings anyways, let them sit empty, and then push for the rezoning *ex post facto* - all to get what they wanted after being denied. The tell is in Bob Ransford's description of the space as a "purpose built cafe."

As the Borg would say, "you will comply."

There's more. Onni has been pushing for a 17,000 square foot grocery store - one of Jimmy Pattison's Nester's Groceries - to be stuck in one of the buildings. Totally not an allowed use under mixed maritime use zoning. So they hired [Mustel](#), a polling and public opinion firm, to see if local residents wanted a new grocery store.

In the report to city council, Onni claims that the survey was overflowing with "unprompted" responses from residents who wanted a new grocery store. Except that the poll was a push-poll. The first four

questions asked poll respondents *just how far* they had to go to get groceries, and how much grocery shopping they did outside of Steveston. Then they asked: "What stores would you like to see in the new development?"

Unsurprisingly, people wanted grocery stores! [This is hardly news: when you ask leading questions, you're "priming the pump" and making people think about what you want them to think about.](#) This can be put to terrific use with unscrupulous polling.

But again, who's surprised? Onni is the Borg. Resistance is futile.

Onni hired experts to say that the retail in the new buildings wouldn't compete with other shops already existing in the village. They claim to be looking for a different tenant mix. But Steveston already has a grocery store. [Bob Ransford thinks this is fine, because, after all, competition is "quite legal and common in free market economies."](#) Except, of course, that it's the opposite of what Onni is promising Richmond.

The issue will go before Richmond's planning commission tomorrow night (April 8) and I doubt that Onni will lose again. Because resistance is futile. And because Onni is offering a \$1,500,000 "voluntary contribution" to Richmond's leisure and culture fund.

Sadly, though, this highlights the death grip that real estate developers have on the Lower Mainland. The duplicity in this case is just more staggeringly obvious.

Here, we have a developer that has insisted that the property zoning on their land isn't "economically feasible," but they went and built what they wanted anyways. Now they say that the City has to acquiesce and comply with their demands, simply because the buildings that they built are empty.

What precedent would Richmond set here? A horrible one. Developers can built whatever they want, no matter the zoning of the land, and then force the City to change the zoning later. The death of local land use planning, all through a set of buildings along an idyllic waterfront.

While people like Bob Ransford might insist that they're just concerned about the community, it strikes me that they're only concerned about parts of the community that they agree with. Ransford himself says he was on the planning committee 17 years ago that set the mixed maritime use zone - he disagreed with it then, disagrees with it now. Only problem with that argument is that Council has decided, and Council represents the community. Nice collateral attack against the decision, though.

Ransford doesn't seem to get the problems here with the developer's duplicity - building what they want and then trying to force the decision *ex post facto*. He says he doesn't care about the developer, only the community. But perhaps he should remember that "perception is reality."

Onni is about to score the ultimate goal: forcing City Council to reverse its decision simply because they did what they wanted. Better to ask forgiveness than permission.

Duplicity abounds. Resistance is futile. You will comply.