



PROJECT PROFILE

CHEMAINUS WATERWHEEL SQUARE



Photos: Chris Istace



IN 1970, Joni Mitchell sang the now-classic line, “They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot.”

In Chemainus, they did the exact opposite: a dreary parking lot was turned into a beautiful town square, helping to revitalize the area with pedestrian-friendly spaces and attractive features to encourage visitors to stay and enjoy the amenities.

Waterwheel Square is now a central hub for the town’s business district. With redevelopments at the adjacent visitor centre and museum, and plans for a new library branch, the whole area feels refreshed, alive, and vibrant.

Mayor Jon Lefebure said that community engagement was a key part of the success of the final design.

“We started with a vision of a town square that would give the community a gathering place and, in our consultations with the public, we heard about the community’s vision for what the space could be,” Lefebure said. “They let us know that they wanted a pedestrian-friendly, multi-use space that would accommodate the Wednesday market, or other special events, and that’s exactly what we’ve got with Waterwheel Square.”

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A new attractive space provides the community a sense of rejuvenation and encourages further improvements by business owners as well as new development. That rejuvenation is more than just a feeling: there are tangible investments happening in town that followed on the heels of the revitalization of the town square.

In addition to a number of commercial property and store-front renovations in the downtown, a new pub has recently opened and a new craft brewery is nearing completion. The improvements have also been a catalyst for a 33 unit residential development overlooking downtown, as well as a proposal for a 40 lot subdivision adjacent to downtown.

Chris Istace owns ‘Beyond the Usual’ - a retail store near the Square. He said that there’s been a dramatic improvement in the town thanks to the Waterwheel project.

“It gives people an area to meet, to plan their day,” he said. “Most of all, it’s inviting and makes tourists want to stay which improves the business environment for retailers in the core.”

The new square has served as a platform for increased visitor numbers. The Chemainus Visitor Centre reports, from March and April of this year, show a total increase in visitor numbers almost double that of the same period last year. The improved functionality provided by the square and reconfigured parking area has also served to attract more bus tours, as demonstrated by an increase of more than 200% over last year.

Dave Devana, Chief Administrative Officer of the District of North Cowichan acknowledges the evidence reported by the Visitor Centre and store owners around Waterwheel Square.

“The Waterwheel project is just the beginning,” said Devana. “It normally takes a bit of time for investments to follow after the municipality puts the work into the public realm, but we’re already seeing the results less than two years after completion.”

