

# FEATURE \$40 million mixed-use commercial play spurred by economic outlook

## Victoria “off to the races”

WI/VTC STAFF

WESTERN INVESTOR

**P**lans to transform the former Sandown racetrack in North Saanich into a \$40 million retail and office complex underscores a quickening economic pace for British Columbia’s capital city region.

“We are off to the races,” said **Peter Laughlin**, **Omicron Development Inc.**’s Vancouver Island director, after receiving unanimous approval for the racetrack redevelopment from North Saanich council last month.

The 12-acre parcel received re-zoning after Omicron donated 83 acres of property, valued at \$2.4 million, to North Saanich and agreed to cover the costs of remediation to ensure it becomes usable agricultural land. The municipality is chipping in 12 acres to ensure there is no net loss of agricultural land as the project completes.

Called Sandown Commons, the proposal passed third reading following a public hearing. It must still be granted a development permit and pass final reading.

If all goes according to plan, the final municipal approvals for the 160,000-square-foot project will be granted by September, Laughlin said.

Omicron is starting its pre-lease process to line up tenants, he added.

The goal is to have the project’s first phase open in spring 2016, Laughlin said.

Omicron is partners with the **Randall** family of Vancouver, the landowner, as developer.

### Employment

North Saanich will not be alone in seeing an economic uptick, according to the consensus at **Chemistry Consulting**’s recent annual economic outlook breakfast at the Victoria Conference Centre.

**Dallas Gislason**, economic development officer with the **Greater Victoria Development Agency**, said Victoria should realize 1.8 per cent growth in its economy this year after last year’s 0.2 per cent contraction.

Victoria could be spurred along by infrastructure projects at the **Department of National Defence**, significant growth in the number of international students, new tax credits for the film industry and improved retail performance, Gislason said. But that appears to be just the start of the rosy picture.

**Alex Rueben**, executive director of the **Industrial Marine Training and Applied Research Centre**, said the region’s shipyards will be inundated through the next 15 years and beyond with work maintaining and enhancing the **Royal Canadian Navy** and **BC Ferries** fleets. There is also a ton of work that will come through the National Shipbuilding and Procurement Strategy, he said.

The shipbuilding program will see \$7.3 billion spent with **Seaspan** to build up to 17 non-combat vessels in B.C. While most of the work on the vessels will be done in Vancouver, Seaspan’s Victoria Shipyards will be responsible for finishing and trials.

“The [new contracts] are taking shipbuilding out of the boom-and-bust cycle that has



Omicron Development has won North Saanich approval for its \$40 million Sandown Commons retail and office complex on the former Sandown racetrack site, shown here.

happened in previous decades, giving it a future and giving people a career in shipbuilding and ship repair,” Rueben said.

Rueben noted all that work and an aging workforce means significant job growth in the industry in B.C.— as many as 2,000 new jobs created through 2020 while losing about 850 people to retirement.

The technology sector is also putting out the word that talent is needed.

“Tell your friends,” quipped **Dan Gunn**, executive director of the **Victoria Advanced Technology Council**, the voice of the high-tech sector. Gunn said the sector, which employs 15,000 people directly in Greater Victoria, is again forecasting growth in the range of eight to 12 per cent and job growth of about 5 per cent.

The tourism industry was a little more guarded in its outlook. **Tourism Victoria** CEO **Paul Nursey** was “cautiously optimistic,” noting improving consumer confidence and economic growth give him reason to expect a positive 2014.

### “Innovative”

Back at Sandown, construction is expected to result in 50 man-years of work and \$3.5 million in salaries, Omicron said in a report. Once it is built, 190 jobs would be created.

Plans call for nine buildings on the commercial property, with 624 parking spaces. It will be designed to reflect rural history with a village ambience, said Omicron’s report to council.

Retail is slated to fill 140,000 square feet.

When asked how this project might affect Sidney, Laughlin pointed to Langford, saying its downtown has thrived because of nearby commercial developments. “It creates a critical mass that actually brings people.”

None of the potential tenants talking to the developer are located in Sidney, he said.

North Saanich Mayor **Alice Finall** said, “It is just such an innovative piece of planning. It is such a good use of this land, which otherwise might not have been used very productively.” ♦

- With files from *Victoria Times Colonist*