



THE CAPITAL AND VANCOUVER ISLAND

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Remains found of hiker who went missing near Sooke

JEFF BELL
Times Colonist

The remains of a 38-year-old woman who went missing after going hiking near Sooke Porpoises almost a year ago were located Wednesday by a group of people who had been searching for her, Sooke RCMP said.

The group found Melissa McDevitt's body in thick vegetation in an area that searchers had previously targeted, police said. Sooke RCMP Staff Sgt. Greg Willocks, the detachment commander, said a group known as Mindful of Melissa on Instagram put in "a remarkable amount of effort" to locate McDevitt over the past year.

The Search and Recovery Dog Association of Victoria said Mindful of Melissa played an integral role, and SARDAV members located the remains.

McDevitt was reported missing on Dec. 12, 2022, after her vehicle was found in the parking lot of the Charters Creek fish hatchery, which is close to a series of trails.

She was last seen carrying hiking poles on surveillance video from the fish hatchery's parking lot on Dec. 9, 2022. She had been due to fly to North Carolina the following day to visit her family.

Police said few other details are being released "out of respect for her family."

"Although a full determination has yet to be made, RCMP do not believe that criminality was involved in the woman's death," Sooke RCMP said in a statement. "The RCMP offers its condolences to the family and friends of the deceased."

The B.C. Coroners Service is also investigating.

A large-scale search for McDevitt was launched in the days after she was reported missing, with about 170 people from 17 search teams on Vancouver Island and the Lower Mainland helping to scour the area's sometimes challenging, steep terrain.

McDevitt's father travelled from North Carolina to work

with the searchers, who put in a combined total of 5,000 hours during the operation.

The search was called off after nine days, but a second search was made in July after data from McDevitt's smart-watch helped narrow down where she could be.

About 80 volunteers from 11 search and rescue teams took part over two days.

Sooke RCMP then maintained an active missing-person investigation and kept in close contact with McDevitt's family.

They acknowledged the "significant efforts" of Juan de Fuca Search and Rescue and assisting search agencies.

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Melissa McDevitt was last seen on surveillance video from fish hatchery's parking lot on Dec. 9, 2022. VIA VICTORIA POLICE



Artist's rendering of the proposed development at 1050 Yates St. in Victoria. VIA CITY OF VICTORIA

Victoria approves 481-unit Harris Green rental project

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Victoria council has given a green light to a mixed-use project that includes 481 rental-housing units in the Harris Green neighbourhood.

Council voted unanimously Thursday to approve a development permit application for the Chard Development project, which will be bordered by Cook Street to the east, Johnson Street to the north and Yates Street to the south.

The project is next to the city's new main fire hall at 1025 Johnson St.

"This is quite spectacular," said Mayor Marianne Alto, the only member of council who was in office when the city rezoned the entire fire-hall precinct in 2019 in hopes of increased residential density and more amenities.

"The applicant has managed to make something that works, but it's also something really unique and frankly quite beautiful in a very futuristic sort of way."

Alto said the site had enormous potential, and she believes Chard's plans will help transform the area.

The L-shaped project will include two rental buildings of 15 and 25 storeys connected by commercial space on

the ground floor.

The 15-storey building will face Cook Street, while the 25-storey tower will front Yates Street. There will also be five two-level townhouses facing Johnson Street.

The project required variances for height and parking — there are only 206 parking spots, while zoning calls for 379.

To offset the lack of parking, the project will include car-share memberships, secure bike parking and a bike repair centre. The building is also on a major transit route and bike route.

Coun. Dave Thompson said the city is getting a lot in exchange for the variances provided.

"When I think about the future of the city and land use, I think it's really important to have development in the right places, and this is a great example of it," he said.

Thompson said the city needs density near transit and bike routes to tackle the shortage of affordable housing as well as climate change.

He noted the 481 rental units will have an impact on the city's low vacancy rate, which sits at about 1.5 per cent.

"This is a key need in our housing spectrum," he said.

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'Sextortion' cases on the rise, say Saanich police

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Saanich police say they're getting a growing number of reports of "sextortion," where someone threatens to reveal an individual's online sexual behaviour if they don't pay a certain amount of money, often using pictures or videos that victims have been convinced to send.

Police said sextortion reports have been rising since last year, and they receive several every month.

The Saanich cases primarily involve male youth, and some of the victims have harmed themselves, police say, adding most sextortion scams are run by criminal groups in eastern Europe and Africa. The department has an internet child-exploitation investigator.

The warning follows the death in Prince George of Carson Cleland, who killed himself in October after becoming a victim of sextortion. After Carson's death, his parents urged other parents to talk to their children about how not to fall victim to online predators.

In October, 37-year-old Kevin Robert McCarty of Oregon was sentenced to 20 months in prison for using social media to stalk and sexually exploit three teenage girls from the West Shore, the Comox Valley and Surrey. McCarty primarily used Snapchat to lure the girls, and also communicated using Instagram, Google mail and Internet voice calls.

Saanich Sgt. Damian Kowalewicz said parents and guardians need to be honest with youth about the dangers of online activity, particularly if they are chatting with people they have not met in real life.

The RCMP's National Child Exploitation Crime Centre received about 52,000 sextortion reports in 2020-21, marking a 510 per cent increase over seven years.

Elizabeth Saeewyc, director of the University of B.C. School of Nursing, who has studied sexual exploitation of children and adolescents, said it can be tricky for parents to stay on top of their children's online lives. "It's difficult because young people are on digital media, on their phones or websites or even in the games that they're playing that have these features that allow you to talk to other people," said Saeewyc.

Saeewyc said predators can also be skilled at moving quickly to get youth to let their guard down and believe there is an "intimate" relationship in the works.

For parents, she said part of the preventive process is having conversations stressing to their children that people they encounter on the internet "may not be who they say they are."

Certain things should raise a young person's suspicions, Saeewyc said, including someone they've never met

in real life claiming to be falling in love right away, or asking them to move to a different software platform — or asking right away for a picture of their face.

"Be cautious, be wary and if they're asking for something more, be aware that it might go somewhere you never expected and it may not be something that you can remove from the internet."

Of the more than 2,300 cases of sextortion in Canada reported from Sept. 1, 2022 to Aug. 31, 2023 to CyberTip.ca, a sexual-abuse tip line, 91 per cent involved boys under 18, and 84 per cent of cases occurred on Instagram or Snapchat.

Saeewyc said the reason so many cases involve males could be linked to a general societal notion that they aren't as much at risk as females. "We do a lot to try to protect girls from being propositioned by people or avoiding strangers and being sexually harassed and things like that, but we don't necessarily think about or have this perspective that boys can be targeted, as well."

As a result, boys and young men might not be as prepared to be cautious or to feel like they don't have to be responsive to something online, she said.

Saeewyc is the research director with the McCreary Centre Society, which conducts the B.C. Adolescent Health Survey every five years. She said the 2018 survey looked into how youth in Grades 7 to 12 used their phones.

They were asked things like how confident they were that they could say no to texting an intimate picture or message, she said, adding eight per cent of young people either didn't think they could say no or weren't sure.

She said access to pornography on the internet could also be a factor.

In March, the provincial government passed the Intimate Images Protection Act to create legal tools to prevent non-consensual distribution of intimate images online, and said it plans to launch an online platform in January where people can report their intimate images being circulated without their consent.

Saanich police offered the following advice for dealing with sextortion:

- Tell your parent or guardian what is happening.
- Don't give in to threats, never pay money and never send additional intimate pictures.
- For investigative purposes, save all texts, images and communications, and take screenshots of messages and the profile of the person involved.
- Make a report through CyberTip.ca, and report the person contacting you via the social-media platform they are using.
- Know that you are not alone and police can help.

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