

GREEN SCENE

A Vision for Riverview

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Participants in a recent tree tour are dwarfed by one of Riverview's magnificent trees. *Bruce Brandhorst photo.*

For the past 18 months, BC Housing, under conditions set by the provincial government, has been conducting a “visioning” process for the future of Riverview Hospital with members of the public invited to provide input. This process is about to wrap up with a final public meeting at 7 pm on June 10 at the Executive Plaza Hotel on North Road in Coquitlam. This meeting will feature a panel discussion following opening remarks from BC Housing. Riverview had a justifiably proud record of providing innovative care for the mentally ill for almost a hundred years since its heritage West Lawn building opened in 1913. For reasons that were inexplicable to many, the provincial government, engaged in the down-sizing of Riverview for many years, decided to completely shut down Riverview in 2012.

Since that time, people have been calling for the return of mental health care to Riverview. There is little doubt we have a serious mental health care crisis in the lower mainland with such a lack of appropriate care facilities that hundreds of seriously ill people with addiction problems are living homeless on our streets

and in our ravines. As the province has been down-loading their responsibilities, taxpayer-generated funds that should be going into providing mental health care have now been diverted into policing and maintaining prisons. There is also a looming crisis in the number of care home beds available for the elderly especially those suffering from dementia and related problems. Hospitals are over-loaded with so-called bed-blockers, i.e., frail people who would be far better served (at considerably less cost) by placement in such care homes. With baby-boomers reaching retirement age, the need for such facilities is predicted to hugely increase.

People who have attended BC Housing's Open Houses to discuss the future of Riverview overwhelmingly support a restoration of mental health care services to Riverview. After the last round of Open Houses in September people had an opportunity to indicate their preference for Riverview's future by voting for preferred uses on BC Housing's website, www.renewingriverview.com. Of those who participated, 96% supported a return of both acute and long term mental health care services to Riverview. In addition, almost 90% supported preservation of the natural environment at Riverview including the protection of Riverview's outstanding tree collection with an estimated value of \$50 million. These almost two thousand mature trees, representative of temperate zones throughout the world, are thought to match or exceed in magnificence the trees at UBC's Botanical Garden or the VanDusen Botanical Garden in Vancouver.

Unfortunately, the province and BC Housing seem to be pushing an alternative vision for Riverview. The province has stipulated that any new development at Riverview must provide revenue to restore the site – but are other hospitals expected to generate the funds needed to operate them? This requirement has attracted attention from developers who see Riverview as an ideal site for residential and commercial development. However, enthusiastic support for such development was lacking in the feedback provided by the public with only 51% supporting a mix of housing which included residences for the mentally ill. When commercial development was couched in low-key terms such as providing an outdoor cafe and selling repair services, only 60% of the public was convinced to support such uses at Riverview.

The City of Coquitlam has taken a wiser approach. Their study conducted by Dr. John Higenbottam calls for a campus of health care excellence at Riverview with complementary uses such as wellness or education training centres plus dedicated park space. Mental health care services at Riverview could be enhanced by providing a variety of ancillary health care services as well as some educational training and cultural opportunities which could create a little daytime “vibe” on site. Certainly Riverview would be an ideal site to offer some instruction in horticultural and landscaping. Riverview, listed by the Heritage Canada Foundation as one of Canada's most endangered heritage sites in 2012, has a number of outstanding heritage buildings which could be repurposed for such uses. Riverview also has a number of more modern buildings dating from the 1950s (similar in age to many functioning hospitals in the lower mainland) which could offer a full range of mental health care services. The film industry uses the Riverview site which provides some much-needed revenue. For example, the beautiful art deco Crease Clinic got a new roof with funds provided by the filming industry.

The Panel invited by BC Housing to speak on June 10 seems to be heavily weighted on the side of the real estate industry with the former City Planner from Vancouver and a professor from the Sauder School of Business at UBC. While two experts in mental health care will complete the four person Panel, it clearly lacks an architect experienced in the restoration of heritage buildings and an arborist who could speak to the value of the trees and the huge challenges of building on a site with such a large collection of mature trees. Nonetheless, I encourage everyone with an interest in the future of Riverview to attend this Panel discussion and provide their input.