

# Green Scene: Mental health care belongs at Riverview

by Elaine Golds

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The Riverview Hospital grounds in Coquitlam. *Kiyoshi Takahashi photo.*

Like many people, I was delighted to learn the provincial government has decided to restore mental health care to the Riverview Hospital site. Of course, mental health care never really left as the Fraser Health Authority maintains 3 newer buildings that provide residential care for about 65 patients and Coast Mental Health operates several cottages for their clients. However, the splendidly-treed 100 hectare site with several useable buildings has much greater potential to provide a full suite of mental health care and wellness services.

Designed as an innovative mental health care site in the early 1900s, the concept behind the establishment of Riverview has certainly withstood the test of time. The site offers a quiet sense of sanctuary on a landscaped hillside reminiscent of an English country estate with an outstanding tree collection and impressive heritage buildings. Originally called Essondale when it opened in 1913, the site provided patients with architect-designed buildings with an abundance of natural light and a healthy

contact with nature. As the world-class tree collection matured over the years, it has been increasingly valued by arborists and tree-lovers who appreciate the manner in which many outstanding groupings of specimen trees are spread throughout the site. The artistic blending of conifers and deciduous trees with varied hues of greens, yellows and russets creates a gracious campus where a walk through the trees not only promotes a sense of unfolding beauty but also regenerates one's spirits. A stroll around the park-like grounds at Riverview is beneficial to everyone's mental wellness.

For almost a year BC Housing, under the direction of the provincial government, has conducted a public visioning process regarding the future use of the lands. The one consistent idea supported by the public and local politicians alike has been that Riverview is the perfect site to provide a variety of much-needed mental health care services. In fact, several of the buildings at Riverview were used in the last decade for residential patient care. The site even has its own recreation centre, Pennington Hall, complete with a gym, bowling alley and other facilities as well as a small soccer field. In addition to residential care, the site has buildings which could provide a continuum of out-patient care services to promote mental wellness. Some out-patient services are already offered at Riverview; surely there is great potential for the site to become a centre of excellence for specialized health care.

The most recent round of public Open Houses to generate ideas on the future use of the Riverview site took place last September. All the ideas gathered were planned to be posted to a website by mid-October. However, so many good ideas came forth that it took longer to visualize and post all the concepts to BC Housing's <http://renewingriverview.com/> website. Members of the public now have a deadline of January 16 to provide feedback through the website on the ideas people suggested for future activities and services at Riverview.

Many excellent concepts were brought forward. People strongly support mental health care on site but also want to see additional facilities to create a vibrant daytime community. For example, there was support for the provision of classes in visual and performing arts. Such classes could be integrated and offered to the public as well as patients. The Henry Esson Young Building, with its classrooms and auditorium could be an excellent place to provide these services. People were also interested in seeing a coffee shop or café on site and suggested that offering food services could become one of the skills taught to recovering residential patients to enable their future employment. Converting the former library in the Henry Esson Young Building to a coffee shop would allow the outdoor terrace with views of the Serenity Garden to be used for serving food during the summer months. It could be a great place to gather after an art class or tree tour. The tree collection and old orchard area have excellent potential to support teaching opportunities in horticulture or landscaping services. These days, the Riverview site itself is in much need of some basic landscaping services; it's possible this could be accomplished over the long term as part of a training program for patients undergoing rehabilitation. There may also be opportunities to create a community garden next to the delightful Finnies Garden which is now maintained by volunteers for the use of patients and public.

There is little doubt, as baby-boomers age, there will be increasing need for long-term residential care services for those suffering from dementia and related diseases. Once again, Riverview with its serene and tranquil surroundings was felt to be an ideal location for such amenities. Another critical need that could be filled at Riverview is a mental health care program for youth. Kwikwetlem First Nation also has an interest in the site and might possibly be interested in developing some traditional healing services or a learning centre.

The only concept which I felt was unacceptable was the desire of some people to see regular residential housing and, possibly, office towers constructed at Riverview. I don't see how such facilities could be integrated within such a specialized community. In fact, I fear developing a regular urban setting at Riverview would, over the long term, result in unrelenting pressure to provide more of the same including commercial buildings and shopping. It would not take long for the special features, unique services and sense of sanctuary that defines Riverview to be totally undermined.

I encourage everyone with an interest in the future of Riverview to participate in the online web survey at [www.renewingriverview.com](http://www.renewingriverview.com). Allow about 45 minutes to go through the 47 illustrations of various activities which can be quickly rated as "loving it", "OK, but needs some work" or "belongs elsewhere". If you care about the future of Riverview, now is the time to speak up.