

Green Scene: Riverview – What Next?

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The provincial government has posted a 115 page draft Heritage Conservation Plan for the Riverview Hospital site for review (see www.riverviewvalues.info/) and recently hosted two public open houses to solicit feedback. Although the comment period closed on October 10, I am concerned the complexity of the report, as well as a lack of familiarity with heritage conservation planning, made it a challenge for most people to respond. One of the key components of the report is the section on Immediate Actions (page 87) which consume a mere third of a page. Here is what the Burke Mountain Naturalists have recommended as immediate actions to protect this significant heritage site. Sadly, most of them are absent from the Plan.

Given the magnificent and much-needed role Riverview has played in providing mental health care for almost a century, the first action should be to attempt to re-use these buildings especially for some form of mental health care. This so-called “adaptive re-use” approach has been used at Riverview with great success for several years.

The attractive Tudor-style buildings of the former Boys School on the Riverview Hospital grounds offer some potential for re-purposing. Photo from the Essondale Annual Report, 1925, courtesy of Niall Williams



For example, the Brookside and Leaside buildings, constructed 1946/48 as nurses’

residences, were recently used for 18 months to treat and provide homes for dual-diagnosed patients (i.e., mental health care patients with a history of drug abuse). The charming cottages on site, originally built as staff homes, are currently being used by Coast Mental Health as residences for their clients. Apparently, their patients enjoy living in the therapeutic setting of the hospital grounds. The movie industry makes good use of the Crease Clinic and East Lawn buildings.

Unfortunately, the first immediate action in the Heritage Conservation Report is to “stabilize” (i.e., mothball) the buildings to protect their heritage values. Mothballing appears to consist of emptying these buildings of every stick of furniture and piece of equipment so as to render them utterly useless. The wonderful Henry Esson Young building (built in 1955 as a nursing school), has excellent teaching space including classrooms and auditoriums – but what good is a classroom without chairs and tables? This time last year, the Valleyview facility (opened in 1960) was providing 75 beds for the care of elderly patients suffering from dementia and related

disorders. What good is a hospital without beds? We fear the “stabilizing” procedures are likely to prevent any constructive re-use of these facilities.

Without a doubt, the West Lawn building (opened in 1913, closed in 1984) needs immediate attention. Gaping holes in the roof allow rainfall to enter the building which may explain why the vegetation growing from its brickwork is doing so well. There is a concern that barn owls, a local species at risk, may already be entering the building to nest or roost. As much as the Naturalists want to save critical habitat for species at risk, we would also like to save this award-winning building, possibly the first ever constructed in BC with reinforced concrete. That it is still standing almost 30 years since it was first abandoned to the elements is testament to its sound construction.

Appendix C of the Heritage Conservation Report lists a number of exceptional trees and tree species at risk in the tree collection at Riverview. Without a doubt, management of this collection requires ongoing attention and an adequate budget...but no such specific recommendation appears in the Heritage Conservation Plan. A key consideration if new buildings are constructed would be potential impacts on ground water flow through the site as this could alter conditions needed to sustain tree growth and health.

One action in the Plan calls for the development of a land use plan but makes only a vague commitment to “public engagement”. Metro Vancouver is interested in the site and submitted a letter to the province which indicated their desire to strengthen the historic connection with Colony Farm Regional Park. Kwantlen College is poised to enter into a partnership agreement with Metro Vancouver Parks to create training opportunities at Colony Farm Regional Park for students in their agricultural program. Teaching facilities will be required - is it possible these could be provided on the Riverview grounds?

Recognition is also required that it may take some time for appropriate solutions and suitable partners to emerge for the future of Riverview – thus, the land use planning process must not be constrained by a tight timeline. The Naturalists are worried developers may be lurking in the shadows. The March 2012 edition of a “Major Projects Inventory” published by the province continues to list as “on hold” a town centre at Riverview with 6000-7000 units of market and social housing. Since 2007, when this concept was first “leaked” to the press, people in this community have been adamant – such a proposal would be totally unacceptable for a remarkable site which should be kept in the public trust. The time has now come for some wise and inspired planning for the future of Riverview.