

Green Scene: Restore Riverview Hospital

by Elaine Golds

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Restore Riverview Hospital? Absolutely! Create a centre of excellence for mental health care at Riverview? What a great idea! These progressive concepts were advanced last week by two Mayors, Ernie Daykin of Maple Ridge and Lois Jackson of Delta. They hope to take this idea in the form of a resolution to the Union of BC Municipalities annual conference in mid-September for adoption by municipalities all across the province. I wish them every success in this insightful endeavor.

This was, of course, the goal the original planners had for Riverview when it was established back at the turn of the last century. For many years, in fact, Riverview fulfilled this role magnificently. With its graciously-designed grounds intended to provide a peaceful and healing environment plus its inspiring heritage buildings, Essondale (as it was originally called) was intended to remain as a place of refuge and care for some of the most vulnerable members of society. In the 1950s, the need for its services was overwhelming as staff struggled to provide care for almost 5000 patients. Now the tables have turned. With the advent of modern drugs and a budget-minded provincial government, policies over the past decade have been directed towards the emptying of Riverview with the unfortunate result that unacceptable numbers of mentally ill people are now living on the mean streets of East Vancouver and in our local ravines.

Riverview Hospital offers a variety of buildings including these residences which can provide care in a home-like setting.
Niall Williams photo.



Why is it that to be mentally-ill is no longer considered to be a health problem? Why has this become, instead, a police problem? How hard-hearted have we grown as a society to believe that appropriate treatment for the mentally ill is complete abandonment with an occasional overnight in a jail

cell rather than medical care in a health-centered setting? While the development of modern drugs has certainly been responsible for remarkable resolutions to some mental health care problems, not all such problems can be fixed by the simple writing of a prescription. Those suffering from severe schizophrenia are unlikely to take prescribed drugs on their own. Nor are they capable of making sensible decisions about their lives. Once such people make the mistake of taking hard drugs instead of prescribed ones, their lives quickly turn into a downward spiral. Such patients need stable, longer-term care in a facility such as Riverview Hospital, not overnight confinement in a jail cell.

As responsibility for caring for the mentally ill has shifted inappropriately to the police force, the costs to municipalities have soared. In Vancouver, the police apprehended 2636 people under the Mental Health Care Act last year; in 1999 only 360 such apprehensions were made. I was stunned to learn police in Surrey spent more than \$600,000 over 5 years to handle 1500 calls to deal with just 8 people who should be receiving treatment within the mental health care system. This is an utter waste of tax dollars that should be more effectively spent providing health care.

Riverview, with many buildings spread over its spectacular 100 hectare site, was designed to provide such care in a holistic setting. It offered recreational facilities including a bowling alley and sports fields. It also provided industrial services where patients could learn new skills. With its therapeutic landscape and world-class collection of trees, it also offered patients training in horticulture and landscaping services. Clearly, there is an urgent need for such treatment facilities to help the mentally ill and provide a stable environment in which they can slowly regain their health.

Our society is also facing another tsunami of mental health care as the baby boomers approach the age of retirement and declining health. Predictions are that the number of people suffering from dementia will increase dramatically in a few years. Eventually all such people will require long term care for, at least, a few years. Not too long ago, Riverview Hospital through its Valleyview facility provided assessment services for dementia patients in modern hospital setting. Sadly, Valleyview is now closed even though the need for such services as well as longer term care facilities is rising. Personally, I cannot think of a more perfect and tranquil site to provide long term care for older patients with diminishing abilities than the beautiful and pastoral grounds of Riverview.

Instead of developing a strategy to deal with such urgent mental health care needs, the provincial government has turned its back on Riverview. Now there is no longer a budget to even mow the grass. People who are expecting the usual groomed and graceful lawns at Riverview for TreeFest this year are going to be dismayed. Nonetheless, Riverview continues to offer what could be the perfect site and solution for a number of our mental health care needs. Next Saturday, on September 14th from 11am - 4pm, TreeFest will once again be held on the Riverview grounds complete with tree walks and tours of the exteriors of its most spectacular heritage buildings. Members of the community are invited to attend to learn more about the site and what hope it could offer to meet some of the most fundamental needs of our society.