

Mobile owners ride a wave that's long past

Alberni Valley Times

Wednesday, April 22, 2009

There's a savage irony at work in the whole issue of all those mobile home parks being gobbled up for re-development across Vancouver Island. In the case of the Falls Road trailer park, where residents have been ordered to vacate by Sept. 1, it's doubly vexing.

A few years back, mobile park property owners discovered that they could make big bucks by evicting their tenants and building upscale condos. Or they could simply sell out to developers, and leave to them the unpleasant job of uprooting those folks who assumed they had a permanent place to stay.

From a strictly business sense, upscale condos ring that "highest and best use" bell that city fathers so long to hear. Higher tax revenues, high-income residents attracted to the community - what's not to like? And quite frankly, when you walk that Falls Road site, it's hard not to imagine the possibilities. The developers have themselves a fabulous site, they've got the ball rolling, and we're right down to the eviction stage.

But that housing boom they were counting on is so - yesterday. One questions whether, under the current economic conditions, the Riverbank Estates project will proceed any time in the near future.

But in the mean time, across the Island, mobile home owners face eviction and serious financial loss - in the name of a building boom that's long since collapsed. They didn't buy risky mutual funds, they didn't take out sub-prime mortgages; they put money into their homes, and now they're getting the heave-ho.

More irony. In the current economic collapse, one would normally imagine that affordable housing, in the form of mobile homes, would suddenly become a prized commodity. Somewhere out there in speculation-land, is undoubtedly a lot of property sitting fallow, waiting for, if not the highest and best use, at least some form of commercial development. And yet, that much-vaunted free market has yet to respond.

There are new mobile parks being built. But they're being downright sniffy about accepting older homes. So many residents with well-used but still liveable mobile units may not even get the chance to relocate.

With a provincial election in a matter of weeks, it's amazing no one has latched onto this issue, because with the private sector holding its nose at building mobile home parks for older homes, it's likely going to take initiatives and/or incentives by local and senior governments to create these much-needed preserves.

The alternative is throwing home-owners into the street and putting a torch to their investments, all in the name of progress that, well, isn't progressing. Organized mobile home owners are calling for new ground-rules for re-development, and much more compensation than the current one year's pad rental. That may come some time in the future. But it's not much help for those unlucky folks still caught in the current of a boom that's long since faded to bust.

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