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OTHER BUSINESS

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RUMOURS AND
WASTED EFFORT

council's insistence that Rainforest try to incorporate as many neighbourhood suggestions as possible into the proposal.

All this time, land prices in Victoria were dropping, particularly land zoned for multi-family developments which no one can now afford to build. In November, 1982, CMHC said that \$325,000 for the land was too much. The city refused to negotiate when Rainforest offered \$301,000 to buy the land outright, and instead a majority of council voted to put it back on the market, without any preference for co-op groups.

Surprise. CMHC allowed Rainforest to bid only \$216,000 for a 40-year lease on the land. Harbourside Housing Co-op, also operated by Bruce Wilkins, bid \$245,000 for a 50-year lease, though this proposal conflicted with city zoning and building requirements.

Then the rumours began to fly. It looked like Robin Blencoe and Gretchen Brewin, who had always supported Rainforest's bid, were trying to get some kind of sweetheart deal for Rainforest. Prominent in the Rainforest group is Leanne Johnson, who works for Innovative Housing, the group which has put together many of Victoria area co-ops. Brewin's husband, John, is counsel to the Innovative board, and Johnson is friendly with the Brewins. Before this, Gretchen Brewin had refused to vote in council on the project, citing her conflict of interest. But now, suddenly, she was voting. She finally told council her conflict no longer existed. In fact, the Innovative board recently voted to accept no reimbursement from Rainforest for the consultative work it had done on the project so far "so that Gretchen could vote," Johnson says.

PLEASE WRITE out 100 times: the only reason for a city to buy residential land is to provide affordable housing for its people. It's a principle city council appears to have forgotten in its handling of the Godfelt site.

First, some background. The city purchased 1.12 acres at 1133 Catherine Street in Vic West, known as the Godfelt property, eight years ago for \$100,000, with the apparent intention of using it for housing. At the time, it was zoned for 34 units. That section of Catherine Street is a collection of recently-restored heritage homes. Naturally, the neighbours did not welcome the prospect of having 34 townhouses next door and wanted the land used for a park. Over the years, they successfully pressured council into downzoning the property to 12 units and instituting design controls on the site.

The planning chairman during this time was master horse-trader Bob Wright. He made these concessions in exchange for an implicit agreement that the neighbours would accept the use of the property for affordable housing, rather than for a luxury townhouse development which would enhance the value of surrounding properties.

So the Godfelt site went on the market late in 1981, in the dying days of the Tindall council, with preference given to co-op groups. With a potential of just 12 units on land valued at up to \$400,000 at the time, the property could barely qualify under CMHC (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation) funding guidelines for such housing. But Rainforest co-op put in their bid for \$325,000 for a 40-year lease, which was the top dollar that CMHC would allow. Peter Pollen's council inherited the project, and accepted Rainforest's bid, though the most vocal of the neighbours, Paul Condon and Peter George, leaned toward a \$300,000 purchase bid by a group called the Homeward Housing Co-op, led by Bruce Wilkins.

Throughout 1982 there was one delay after another, partly due to Rainforest's attempts to find a contractor who could do the job within their budget, but also due to

Other apparently suspicious events: the tender period for the project was only open three weeks; the tenders were opened at an in-camera committee meeting Jan. 6, apparently because Rainforest might lose its CMHC unit allocation if council didn't decide on the project quickly; and though the committee was deadlocked, Blencoe added a last minute motion to the Jan. 13 council meeting agenda to accept the Rainforest bid.

Much outrage and consternation at council. Pollen was angry that the bidding period was so short and the bids were so low, while Janet Baird, John Cooper and Eric Simmons felt the project was being rushed through without enough consideration. So Blencoe's motion failed. The official city hall position is now that neither of the bids have been accepted and the project is dead, though the Housing Advisory Committee is trying to revive it.

There is no question that the Godfelt site, with its location close to downtown and its views of the Gorge waterfront, would make a very attractive site for a high-class housing development.

But when all is said and done and debated, the essential issue remains— it would be improper for the city to use the Godfelt site for anything other than affordable housing. Certainly the people who planned to live in the Rainforest co-op aren't all poor— the co-op program is designed for a mix of income levels, so that those who are better off subsidize the housing for those who aren't. Rainforest has members who are teachers and carpenters, as well as single parents. But only through a co-op will any of them will ever be able to become homeowners.

That principal is what a majority of city council seems to have forgotten during a year of endless discussion about access roads and landscaping designs. And they've forgotten it again now in their embarrassment at not having accepted in November a re-negotiated price which was \$85,000 higher than the one they are now being offered.

The neighbourhood may be happy that the land will continue to sit vacant. But the rest of us should be angry.