

Saanich heritage house to become seniors' centre

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By Grania Litwin

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A heritage house purchased by Saanich in 1973 for \$123,000 will become a seniors' centre to serve the entire region.

Councillors decided last week to allow Goward House Society use of Woodlands, a vacant home at the corner of Haro and Arbutus roads in Cadboro Bay.

The society so far has only 123 members — at an annual fee of \$10 — but it hopes to have many hundreds soon.

It is being modelled on Brock House in Vancouver, a seniors' activity centre founded 11 years ago which today boasts 3,000 members who pay \$6 annually.

Built in 1908 by Bernard Goward, Woodlands nestles on 2.5 wooded hectares.

While seen by some as an ideal seniors' centre, others claim at least part of the site should be developed to provide some return to the municipality and help keep taxes down.

"This is six acres of prime land . . . there's no way we can justify it going to one group in our community," Ald. Carol Pickup told committee of the whole. When proponents of the scheme complained, she suggested seniors' housing might be built there.

But society spokesman Foster Isherwood disagreed.

"We have incorporated our society, initiated a membership drive, sought architectural plans . . . a great deal has been done on the understanding the whole property would be included, that it would remain inviolate.

"This is not a club for a small number of people — it is for all the people of Victoria and we want to retain the whole arboretum."

Mayor Howard Sturrock asked how

a strip of housing along Haro Road would "sabotage" the project: "How could it possibly affect your plans?"

But Isherwood remained intransigent: "The whole piece of property is necessary . . . you can lease the property across the street for affordable housing . . . or the Blenkinsop Valley, that's a beautiful area.

"We plan to reconstruct all of the grounds and utilize the whole area."

Sturrock and Pickup voted against the exclusive use.

Ald. John Mika noted Brock House has less than half the land yet serves thousands. The facility is located on less than a hectare, but is in a prime waterfront location adjacent to Jericho Tennis Club.

Municipal planner Alan Hopper recommended using part of the Goward property for low-cost housing after council requested he suggest suitable sites.

He presented an inventory of 31 publicly owned lands — six of which were ideal for such housing.

Council requested the report as it wants to sell or lease land not only to provide affordable housing, but also to fund a fourth recreation centre.

Montreal Trust real estate manager Ron MacDonald estimated 2.5 hectares of raw land in the Haro area would fetch close to \$1.5 million if developed for single family and in excess of \$2 million if developed for multiple housing.

Fourteen percent of Saanich's core has been dedicated to special needs and affordable housing although the municipal average is 4.5 per cent — Cadboro Bay has none.

Cadboro Bay Ratepayers' Association president Gerry Gabel said his 487-member group supports the seniors' project and would agree to housing across the street, on 4.29

municipally owned hectares. The latter was previously reserved for a pumping station but is no longer needed because of the east coast interceptor.

Supporters believe the Goward property will become an important greenbelt in the district.

"Except for the immediate area around the house, the property will be open to the public," said society president Kenneth MacNeill, who has lived next to Woodlands for more than three decades.

"We hope to restore a good portion of the garden which has been choked out by ivy and have lots of activities outside. Our immediate goal is to sign up 500 members and look for major sponsors and donors."

Preliminary estimates predict it will cost \$200,000 to \$250,000 to renovate the 330-square metre house. "There is no insulation, some parts need to be completely gutted, we want to extend the verandah so we can have teas outside and it needs to be lightened up inside."

Municipal archives researcher Louise Ditmars said the house was built in the style of a British Colonial vernacular bungalow.

"Apparently the first Mrs. Goward had spent some years in India and didn't like too much sunlight so the house is very dark inside."

Affordable housing advocate Dorothy Livingston applauded Saanich for initiating an inventory of public lands which might be developed for low-cost housing.

Livingston, who is on the Capital Region Housing Corporation, said 15 per cent of low cost housing ought to be the standard throughout the region.

"More than 800 families are on a CRD waiting list for housing."