

LAST IN A SERIES



Fernwood

As the "junky" in "Funky Fernwood" fades to memory, the neighbourhood known for its youthful vibrance evolves to face its next challenges. Many businesses have invested in the once-derelict commercial strip, but their long-term viability requires continued effort.

Community celebration

Many of Victoria's 13 neighbourhoods hold an annual summer festival, but none can hold a candle to the shaker known as FernFest. It's one of only dozens of community initiatives and events that prove Fernwood is in a league of its own.

Here's a sample:

■ **Pole painting:** a strategy to combat graffiti, organizers were surprised by a flood of participants last summer.

■ **Fernwood Bites:** a festival of food and drink entering its third year.

■ **Water well:** a source of clean water available for everyone and tested monthly.

■ **Spring Ridge Common & Kale Corner:** community garden initiatives launched by pushing the envelope on city bylaws.

■ **Village Vibe:** one of a few neighbourhood-run newspapers in the city.

■ **Good food box/Swap 'n' shop:** Sources of food, clothes and other basics that don't require big bucks, or any bucks at all.

■ **Compost Education Centre:** started as a community initiative, now a freestanding non-profit hub for gardeners city wide.



Terry Wilson, also known as Bubble Man, shows off his craft outside the Cornerstone Cafe in Fernwood.

File photo

A model of social enterprise

Roszan Holmen
News staff

Students of a new university crowded around small tables to learn about growing a sustainable neighbourhood economy last night.

The setting chosen for this series of workshops, dubbed Fernwood U, is fitting.

Cornerstone Cafe bustles with customers, discussion and live music. It's also an example of grassroots social entrepreneurship in action.

In 2005, the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group bought the derelict building across from Fernwood Square. Today, it's a major source of revenue for the non-profit. Rent from the affordable housing units above the cafe provide another income stream.

Lee Herrin, NRG's executive director, hears reports of other non-profits suffering in these economic times.

"We don't have these problems," Herrin said. The organization's reliance on grants has shrunk from 69 to less than 30 per cent.

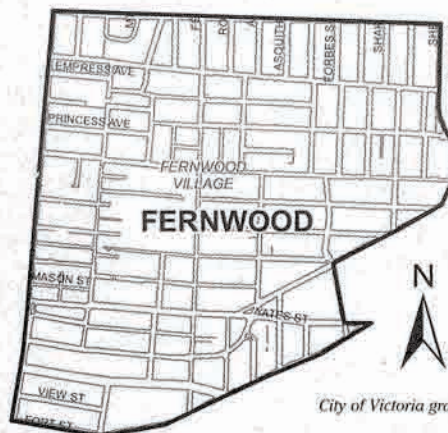
The transformation of "Funky Junky Fernwood" is now the stuff of local legend.

It's a story that those involved recount with pride, despite the controversy over the bold plan at the time. NRG's purchase of the derelict Cornerstone building on Gladstone Avenue lit a fire in the community, triggering investment in Fernwood Inn, followed by a number of trendy eateries and retailers.

"It's still got a bit of an edge, but it's a really interesting, and cool and happy place to be," said Herrin.

Today, the crisis is over, but the challenges facing the neighbourhood aren't. The key is to keep the momentum going.

With an eye to making the square more inviting, 22 businesses have banded together.



City of Victoria graphic

The gazebo has become an established dumping ground for people's unwanted furniture and clothing, said Steve Aston, owner of Freedom Kilts and chair of the seven-month old Fernwood Business Owners' Group.

"(It has) an incredibly negative impact on our visitors," he said.

Further, one group of people (who Ashton describes as the couch surfing, drug using crowd) dominate the square and set the tone, he said. The litmus test for a welcoming atmosphere is the presence of women and children, he said, adding the goal is to welcome everyone, including the current users.

Parking is another sticking point.

People coming from outside the neighbourhood inevitably end up circling the block before finding a stall well outside the village. It's a major deterrent, and one directly responsible for the closure of many businesses, said Ash-

ton. He plans to flyer the entire neighbourhood to launch a discussion.

Members of the Fernwood Community Association board acknowledge the barrier, but there's no consensus.

Some would rather encourage walking or busing, instead of facilitating vehicle traffic. But public transit isn't an easy solution, either.

"I think we have the honour of having the worst bus service in the city," said Tony Sprackett, president of the community association board.

Boarded up buildings are another challenge for the association.

"We're losing a really affordable stock in rooming houses," said David Maxwell, land-use chair. "The owners of those places are going out of business and we're losing that (affordable housing) stock."

He estimates there are more than 31 units boarded up in the neighbourhood.

There's light at the end of the tunnel for at least one of these empty houses, however, in the form of a redevelopment.

Sometime early this year, a private proposal for a 21-unit co-housing complex will go to public hearing at City Hall. It's a model of housing designed to be more affordable and communal than private condos, by having large common areas for shared meals and a governance structure based on consensus.

Dubbed the Fernwood Urban Village, it is "an ecological development which seems designed and tailored to fit in with the tenants of the (city's) new draft Official Community Plan," said Bill McKenchnie, one of the project's leaders. "Home owning members ... want to reduce their carbon footprint and (address) food security, affordability, as well as social well being."

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