



Sharon Tiffin/Victoria News

Roberta Martell, executive director of the Fernwood Neighborhood Resource Group, takes a load off at the soon to be opened Cornerstone building café in Fernwood Wednesday.

# Building reborn

Renovated Cornerstone building expected to open next month

Brennan Clarke  
Victoria News

Eleven months ago, the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group undertook the most ambitious project in the society's 27-year history, engineering a land swap that gave the community ownership of a long-vacant building at the corner of Fernwood Road and Gladstone Avenue.

Next month the fully renovated Cornerstone building will re-open, complete with four apartment suites upstairs, with the main floor divided between a café owned and operated by the resource group and retail business that's slated to open next month.

Resource group executive director Roberta Martell said the last year has been a frenzy of activity, with various contractors and a small army of volunteers working long hours to get the project up and running.

"It's been pretty motivational," Martell said of the debt the society incurred when it bought the building. "It's one thing if your own money is sunk into a project, but if you're doing this with a non-profit, you'd better be prepared to make it happen. Failure was not an option."

The resource group society borrowed \$715,000 to purchase the \$1.28 million building from owner Robin Kimpton, throwing in a house the society owned at 1423 Fernwood Rd. to make up the difference.

The society spent about \$325,000 on construction renovation and another \$123,000 to install a geo-thermal heating system that relies on two 360-foot wells to capture heat from the earth below.

Martell said the heating system should pay for itself "in about seven years."

The three-bedroom apartment suites rent for \$989 a month, heat and hot water included, a couple hundred dollars below the going rate.

All four units have been rented. The tenants are slated to move in Nov. 1, providing the project passes final building inspection next week.

Rental income from the building, along with profits from the Cornerstone Café, will help service the debt and, hopefully provide a little revenue for the community centre's programs.

"As of Nov. 1, the building will be full," Martell said.

That's a heady statement for a community that has struggled with the

derelict property for more than five years.

The building has been empty since 2001. Prior to that a string of failed businesses opened and closed on the main floor, while squatters occupied the second floor, at one point using the spaces as a chop shop for stolen bicycles.

Neighbours such as the Belfry Theatre, the Fernwood Inn (formerly the George and Dragon Pub) and businesses on the other side of Fernwood Road expressed concern the derelict property was stifling the vitality of the village core.

Once the society took ownership of the building, volunteers hauled away junk by the truckload and good samaritans donated time, energy and materials. Victoria builder Garde Collins provide free advice and design drawings. Surveyor Glen Mitchell donated his services. One woman dropped off a set of kitchen cabinet that will be used in the café. Another person donated some lights. City councillors, Coast Capital Savings and the Fernwood United soccer team all lent a hand.

"We tapped in to the best of Fernwood," said Martell.

bclarke@vicnews.com