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CASTLEGAR NEWS



Bench honours lost friend

On May 31 family members of the late Wanda Mears along with her friends from the Kootenay Robusters Dragon Boat Team, placed a bench honouring her memory. The bench is located above Texas Point and overlooks the part of Christina Lake where Wanda spent happy times paddling with her team and enjoying the peace and serenity of the area. Pictured on the bench are Wanda's husband Steve and her two children Kurt and Kyla.

Affordable housing model presented

FRANCISCO CANJURA
News Reporter

Community housing groups in the region had a chance to hear how to make good use of derelict and un-used buildings at the Lower Columbia Community Development Attainable Housing Forum, held in Trail last week.

Lenore Rankin, development co-ordinator for the Fernwood Neighbourhood Resource Group (NRG) and Roberta Martell, executive director of the Fernwood NRG, who won the 2008 CMHC national housing award were invited to the forum to talk about their accomplishments.

The two were able to turn a derelict building in the neighbourhood of Fernwood in Victoria into affordable housing with a revenue generator on its main floor.

Martell and Rankin's group was able to purchase a heritage building for \$1.4 million and

with another \$500,000 they were able to refurbish it.

"We revitalized it through community effort and community ownership," said Martell.

"(We) put affordable housing upstairs and did social ventures on the main floors to generate revenue for our enterprising non-profit."

"It's a really awesome model of how communities can actually take problem buildings in their communities and turn them into community assets."

She added the project has not only created jobs and opportunities, but it has also revitalized the neighbourhood of Fernwood.

Rankin said they began the project by pulling the community together and holding forums to see what would be best for their neighbourhood and identifying the problems in their community.

"We identified that

(building) as being the key problem in our neighbourhood and then, through the organization, put a plan together to purchase the building," Rankin said.

Considering the economy in a downturn and the number of people on welfare rising, Rankin said a model like theirs is something communities should look at as much can be accomplished.

"Not only do you reclaim heritage buildings, but you create affordable housing. Quite often there is a whole community revitalization that happens as a result. Also, there is quite often employment that is created so you are really hitting a lot of bases by doing this type of venture," she said.

Martell and Rankin said they hope to help Castlegar New Vision Housing Society in their efforts to bring affordable housing and revitalization to Castlegar.

Martell said she believes these projects are not only worthwhile to provide affordable housing, but also to protect housing stock in the future.

"It's going to get more expensive and you might be getting a bit of a reprieve right now because the markets hit the skids, but dollars to doughnuts, it's going to go up in the next five years and you want to actually own some land so the community can determine its own future," Martell said.

Andy Popoff, executive board member of Castlegar New Vision Housing Society, said what really stuck on his mind after Rankin and Martell's presentation was that there is no project too big to tackle.

He also discovered there is a lot of funding available to community groups through BC Housing and CMHC.

"I also learned that it is important to involve the community

in the process to make it viable. It is becoming the wave of the future, I think, where the community has to pull out their socks and try to pull things together," said Popoff.

Castlegar is in need of low income and interim housing and maybe even supportive housing, he said.

Popoff said the Castlegar society is new and they are still in the planning stages, but they recognize there is a lot of opportunity with vacant lands and building which can be put to use in the same way Rankin and Martell put together their project.

"I think they (Rankin and Martell) are great motivators and an example of what can be done," he said.

The society will have a general meeting on July 15 at 7 p.m. at the Castlegar Christian Fellowship Church.

Anyone interested in the cause is welcome, said Popoff.