



Roberta Martell, executive director of the Fernwood Community Centre, with Lisa Helps, vice-chairman of the board, in her arms celebrate along with community activist Ron Spence. They were barely able to contain their excitement on Tuesday over the purchase of the old Parfitt Building at the corner of Gladstone and Fernwood by the Fernwood Community Centre.

Debra Brash/Times Colonist

Community dream fills Fernwood's black hole

Behind its boarded-up exterior, the dark, dead deli looks as though it was deserted in a hurry. The chalk-lettered menu still hangs on the wall, advertising pizza and lattes. Bags of scone mix sit on the counter. By the dust-covered cash register, a yellowing parody newspaper — the *Times Compost* — dates back to March 2001.

It's been that long since there's been much life in this two-storey building, not counting the squatters who occasionally burrowed into the griminess upstairs. Bad news for the neighbourhood, a black hole in the very heart of Fernwood, across from the Belfry Theatre and the George & Dragon restaurant.

Which is why the people at the Fernwood Community Centre were

all but quivering with delight on Tuesday when they took possession of the heritage Parfitt Building at the corner of Fernwood Road and Gladstone Avenue.

"The renaissance of Fernwood has begun," declared Roberta Martell, the community centre society's executive director.

The group plans four units of affordable family housing upstairs. Downstairs, the idea is to attract a handful of the kind of businesses that breathe life into a community — a coffee shop, laundromat, bakery, maybe a bistro where the after-theatre crowd can hang around instead of bolting for their cars. The bigger dream is the growth of a people-friendly centre with everything Cook Street Village has, "but sexier."

The neighbours are certainly happy. The Belfry will donate the proceeds of Aug. 8 performance of *The Ballad of Jim Pane* to help the community centre buy the building.

Ron Spence, a community activist who owns the building kitty-corner from the Parfitt Building, was beaming Tuesday. "It's a psychological boost," he says.

Spence sees a shift in Fernwood, not so much gentrification as funkification, a boho artsiness weighting a teeter-totter that has sometimes seasawed toward the unsavoury. (Note that city councillor Dean Fortin, while looking for his stolen mountain bike, once stumbled across a bicycle chop shop upstairs in the Parfitt Building.)

Spence sees a newly blossomed Tuesday-evening market and the creation of Fernwood's own monthly newsletter, the *Village Vibe*, as positive signs of change. "There's a lot of good, bright people coming to this neighbourhood," he says. "I hate to get '60s on you, but there's a whole energy thing happening here."

Key to Tuesday's transaction has been what Martell calls a respectful relationship between the community centre and Robin Kimpton, a Vancouver lawyer whose Victoria property holdings included the Parfitt Building. Kimpton has been at war with city hall for a couple of years over the condition of some of his properties, two of which, including the Gladstone property, were ordered boarded up last year.

In return, he is suing the city, whose actions were part of a wider crackdown on rooming houses deemed substandard.

The crackdown itself has been controversial, as the kind of low-end accommodation such buildings provide has made it harder to find shelter for those \$325-a-month welfare tenants deemed hard to house — the afflicted and addicted. "If I provide affordable housing I get a halo over my head," says Martell. If Kimpton does it, he gets vilified.

In any case, Kimpton and the community centre found a way to work together. As part of the sale, Kimpton will get a Fernwood Community Centre-owned house on Fernwood Road.

The house is zoned for offices; City Green, a non-profit environmental organization, will stay upstairs. Social programs will move to the community centre not far away.

And, if all goes according to plan, new life will be breathed into the little square at the heart of Fernwood.

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