

Fernwood flip gets enthusiastic response

Fernwood Community Centre Society goes in hole to purchase larger building in village core

Don Descoteau

Weekend Edition

Over the years the Fernwood neighbourhood has received a bad rap.

Whether aimed at the relatively low property values or the drug dealing and using that seemed rampant for a while in certain pockets, the area has absorbed its share of criticism.

These days, however, there is a sense of optimism in the neighbourhood, with property values increasing, residents taking pride in their surroundings and the crime issues being dealt with.

It hasn't all been wine and roses, however. In the past year, friction over who had the best interests of the neighbourhood at heart developed between members of the Fernwood Community Association and the non-profit Fernwood Community Centre Society. The FCA is based in a funky old building at 1923 Fernwood Rd., while the FCCS runs the centre on Gladstone Avenue and, up until last week, operated a daycare program out of a home it owned at 1423 Fernwood Rd.

Last week FCCS members celebrated what they called the rebirth of the village core, after the society orchestrated a swap of its Fernwood building with the distinctive, yet dilapidated heritage building at Gladstone and Fernwood owned by controversial landowner Robin Kimpton.

"There is a deliberate intent to bring the village core up. This is the cornerstone of that," FCCS board chair Lee Herrin said of the \$1.28 million pur-



DON DESCOTEAU/VICTORIA NEWS

Fernwood Community Centre Society executive director Roberta Martell proudly shows off the keys to the society's new building at Gladstone Road and Fernwood

chase, which saw the society pay a difference of about \$715,000 after trading Kimpton the Fernwood house.

The fundraising has already begun as a way to offset that balance, but FCCS volunteers and staff say this new undertaking will be a great way to rejuvenate the village and create an increased sense of community.

Don't expect any cheesy or trendy businesses to open up shop in the lower section of the Gladstone building, FCCS executive director Roberta Martell said.

Such community-building merchants as a restaurant-bistro and a laundromat are being sought for the commercial spaces, she said.

The upper floors will be completely

renovated and rented out as "market-based affordable housing," Martell said, and will include two two-bedroom and two three-bedroom suites.

Such initiatives as involving Victoria high school carpentry students in the renovation of the four suites, and creating a dinner theatre program in conjunction with the Belfry Theatre are being tossed around.

As well, the Best Babies program previously housed in the Fernwood house has already moved to the community centre.

Martell said a deal is pending for the building housing the George and Dragon Restaurant across Gladstone and the prospective owner is already keen to co-ordinate with the FCCS and

the Belfry, she added.

Ron Spence, who said his building kitty-corner from the new FCCS property has had a waiting list for tenants for some time, agreed people in the neighbourhood are increasingly feeling comfortable about getting out and using the services in the village.

"Where else can you get a slice of pizza, get your ears pierced and buy yourself a kilt," he said.

Adjacent building owner Mike Sharpe said having more activity in the area should help nearby residents feel more safe and attract people to the village.

Herrin went out on a limb and said "I can see that Fernwood Village is going to become a destination."