

AT HOME

Editor: Liz Pogue > Telephone: 250-380-5373 > E-mail: features@tc.canwest.com

COMMUNITY

Building for friendship

Shared spaces and places to walk strengthen social fabric

PEDRO ARRAIS
Times Colonist

The backyard fence may be absent, but today's condo dwellers are developing new ways to get to know their neighbours.

There was a time when the latest gossip was exchanged over a common fence. With the move to condos and busier lifestyles, many people hardly know who their neighbours are, let alone chat with them.

Socializing between neighbours can have a positive influence on well-being. To increase interaction among residents, some developers have designed communities instead of just homes.

"We have to go back to the way we were, to design neighbourhoods on a more human scale," says Doug Makaroff, developer of Living Forest Communities, a community set within a 385-hectare managed forest in the Cowichan Valley Regional District. "By making services only a five-minute walk away, there is less dependence on the car and an increase in face-to-face interaction among residents."

Another strategy to increase interaction is to locate a home's porch within four metres of the sidewalk. This is the optimum distance to initiate conversation from people passing by on the street, Makaroff says. Unfortunately this strategy is only possible in strata communities, as most municipalities require setbacks of up to nine metres from a road.

Makaroff says a successful community needs to

offer services in close proximity to their homes. Developments should include a mix of uses, such as commercial spaces with residential units. Housing should also attract homeowners of different ages and income levels. For seniors, there should be a range of affordable independent- and assisted-living options.

While the ideal development scenario will have a community hall or recreation centre where residents can meet and interact, residents of new condos don't have the luxury of a common space. The new focal point for some condo dwellers might be their neighbourhood coffee shop.

"Times have changed. A coffee shop has become a social point for some of the people who live in the neighbourhood," says Ryan Taylor, owner of Caffè Fantastico, which has shops in Quadra Village, Cook Street Village and Dockside Green.

"It has become an easy spot for people to meet up and find out what's going on in the neighbourhood."

He has more than once observed people chatting in the coffee shop, then realizing they are neighbours in their condo building.

He underscores the concept of social interaction by sharing the fact he first met his wife when she came in for a coffee. Today she is his partner in the business.

For their part, some developers include common areas in each project to foster everyday interactions between neighbours.

Instead of a fitness centre, developer David Chard put in a rooftop patio with a barbecue and an outdoor



Above: The courtyard "gathering space" of a condo project under construction on Johnson Street. There is also an indoor movie room in the same space.

Right: Living Forest Communities, in the Cowichan Valley, emphasizes a communal recreation area and walkability in its Trailhead complex.

movie viewing space in one development, and a ground-floor courtyard and movie room in another upcoming project.

"With condos getting smaller — some are only 450 to 550 square feet — people need an area to socialize and meet other people," says Chard, who is developing another condo at 834 Johnson St.

"Our common areas offer residents who enjoy the urban lifestyle the opportunity to entertain and lounge around outside their living spaces."

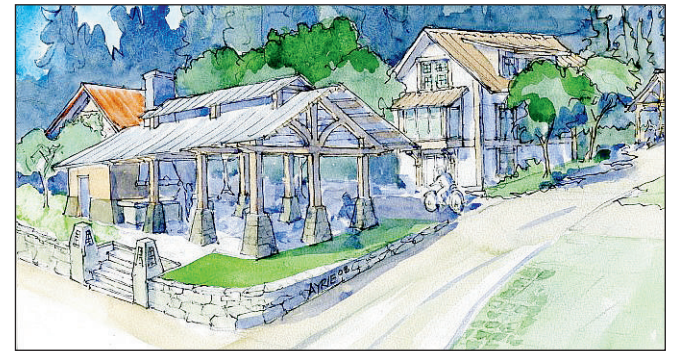
One couple took the concept a step further, booking

the rooftop patio of their condo building to hold their wedding reception last August, soon after they moved into the building.

While developers try to provide the threads to weave a community's social fabric, it is ultimately up to the residents themselves to sew together a patchwork of relationships.

Continued and frequent interaction between residents is the basis of a community, as Wendy Pryde will tell you.

"We have potlucks and a group of us, three or four couples, regularly have dinner in each other's condos,"



COURTESY OF CHARD DEVELOPMENT

COURTESY OF THE TARTAN GROUP

says Pryde, who lives in the Corazon in downtown Victoria. "We don't have to drive, we don't care about the weather. It's great."

When the weather is good, the group may walk to a nearby restaurant instead.

In her condo building, returnable bottles are collected and the money put toward funding two events

a year — a barbecue and a wine-and-cheese party. She credits the building's managers for their part in organizing social activities for the residents.

All around us, the modern equivalent of the over-the-fence backyard chat is flourishing.

parrais@tc.canwest.com

Strata Property Act defines conflicts of interest



TONY GIOVENTU
Condo Smarts

Dear Condo Smarts: Our strata had a typical flood before the holidays where an overloaded washing machine went manic and soaked three units in our building.

The council was contacted, they made arrangements for restoration and we had fans in hallways and holes cut in the walls for dryers. The owners were impressed that it happened so quickly.

As for the owner with the manic washing machine, she received a bill for the

deductible amount of \$5,000.

She was about to pay it, but noticed the bill was not from the insurance company, so she called the insurer to see the insurance invoice. Council refused to file the claim and we've now found out the council hired themselves to do the restoration work and bill it back to the owner.

There was no adjuster involved, and no report on the scope of the work that was done, or if even all the restoration was complete.

One owner is still left with a water-stained ceiling and no one coming to her aid.

Is it a conflict of interest when council members pay themselves?

Liz W., Richmond

Dear Liz: Conflict of interest is a common bone of contention in strata corporations when the council executes decisions that

result in personal benefits without the consent of the strata owners or exempting the benefited strata council member.

According to the Strata Property Act: a council member who has a direct or indirect interest in a contract or transaction with the strata, or a matter that is being addressed by the strata, if that interest could result in the creation of a duty or interest that conflicts with that council member's interest or duty as a council member, has a conflict of interest. That council member must:

- 1) disclose fully and promptly to the council the nature and extent of the interest;
- 2) abstain from voting on the transaction or matter; and
- 3) leave the council meeting while the contract, transaction or matter is discussed, and while the remaining

council members vote on the contract, transaction or matter.

All that can be a bit overwhelming for owners, so let us go over the basics:

■ Strata council members must act in the best interest of the strata corporation.

■ Council members cannot be compensated for their duties as council members, without the approval of the owners — in the budget, in the bylaws or by approved 75 per cent vote at a general meeting.

■ Also, council members cannot vote on the awarding of a contract, transaction or matter where they have some sort of direct or indirect personal or beneficial gain. You can review the minutes of the council meeting to learn if the rules were followed.

Strata council can determine who they contract with, and that could include a council member.

But you need to ask if that person is qualified.

Would it be a prudent decision to contract with a council member who might not be qualified, covered by WCB, insured or even competent to perform the work?

In your case, were the repairs and restoration completed properly? Were there any environmental or health restoration requirements, such as grey water or a sewage backup? Was any restoration contemplated to prevent future mould?

The owner of the faulty washing machine might also have a problem with her own insurance company. She might have coverage for a deductible payment she was required to make to the strata corporation's insurance company, but that coverage wouldn't take effect if she's getting a bill from the strata corporation for a repair.

Council members who try to cut corners on the cost of claims or who attempt to compensate each other for any strata council duties, without the owners' approval, are just opening the door for conflicts.

Even if a claim was not processed, it is likely, once the insurance company was contacted, that the damages and loss reported form part of the strata claims history and will result in higher future policy costs and deductible rates.

Tony Gioventu is executive director of the Condominium Home Owners' Association. Send questions to him c/o At Home, Times Colonist, 2621 Douglas St., Victoria, B.C. V8W 2N4 or e-mail tony@choa.bc.ca.

To find details of a one-day workshop on strata living and the Strata Property Act in Victoria, scheduled for March 13, visit www.choa.bc.ca.



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