

There Goes The Neighbourhood.

Prospective commercial tenants think twice with a shooting gallery next door.



Motel after dark: whatever judgments might be passed on a motel owner who profits from misery, the fact remains that he's providing half-decent shelter for people who might otherwise face even worse living conditions, and he's putting up with a whole lot of trouble in the bargain.

Doug Foord has a piece of commercial property just primed to go - access off of three streets, clean soil, blocks from Victoria's downtown. There's talk that the music store Long & McQuade might be interested in the site.

Only one problem: the weary old motel next door is packed with addicts, many of them involved in prostitution, trafficking and crime to support their habits. And Foord's prospective tenants might not like that too much.

Foord has contracted with Shell Canada to develop the lot where the old Payless Gas station used to be on Hillside Avenue near Douglas Street, across from the liquor store. But it's a tough sell as long as the Holiday Court Motel stays open next door. The motel is a shooting gallery for the city's addicts who mass there because it's one of the few places that welcomes their business.

There aren't many neighbours left around the motel any more: the Esso station and Seven-11 on the corner were torn down last year, and there's only one small office building left behind the motel. The people in the apartments across Market Street hate the place, as does SG Power next door.

"I don't even know how many times we've had police cars pulling in here. I've been here three years and at least a half-dozen times I've had the police running through our store looking for someone who's hiding behind the stuff," says SG Power employee Jamie Dick. "What would we like? The Holiday Court gone, gone or facelifted into a legitimate motel business."

There are Holiday Courts by one name or another in every city, and a number of previous versions in this one - the Drake, the York, the Pacific Isle. It starts with an aging hotel struggling to keep its doors open and typically ends decades later at the business end of a wrecking ball, a "rejuvenation" having been brought on either through development pressures or fed-up neighbours.

The Future: If Holiday Court were bulldozed tomorrow...

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It's happened in this city many times in the past. Local businessman John Asfar even makes it a bit of a speciality, freshening up aging "welfare motels" for his Traveller's Inn chain.

The facelifts aren't intended for those who live there, though. They'll be forced out as rents go up and tolerance goes down, left to drift to another faltering hotel or apartment block somewhere else in town. "There's always someplace," says one Holiday Court resident.

Set out to tear that one down too and another will develop somewhere else, because the problem is not the Holiday Court or any of the other rundown rooming houses around town. The problem is addiction in a world that would rather not deal with it.

Things can be done: Two or three old hotels in Vancouver's troubled downtown eastside are now being run under government contract, and the city's brand-new Portland Hotel opened this summer specifically to house the people who no one else wants.

The rent is \$325, the current maximum for people living on welfare. The floors are treated concrete for easy cleanup. The toilets are practically unpluggable. Everything about the place is built to handle people who "need some help living in the world," says Linda Thomas, director of housing with the Vancouver-Richmond Health Board. Drug use and all the problem behaviours that go along with it aren't condoned, but no one among the 24-hour staff is looking for reasons to evict.

"The old-style public housing model was to offer places to live to the 'good' people, the ones deemed to have earned it," says Thomas. "But U.S. studies are finding that just by giving people housing and support services, you start to give them strength. If we don't offer people more stable housing, they're never going to get their life together."

Maybe Victoria needs such a hotel too. And maybe one day there will be new laws and attitudes around drug use that address the problems rather than punish the addicted.

But this is now and neither of those possibilities are sure things anytime soon. If Holiday Court were indeed to be bulldozed tomorrow, the only certainty would be that 35 or so motel residents and scores more who drop by to shoot up would scatter all over the city, at least until they found another motel or rooming house willing to take their money and put up with the chaos that addictions ultimately create.

And whatever judgments might be passed on a motel owner who profits from misery, the fact remains that he's providing half-decent shelter for people who might otherwise face even worse living conditions, and he's putting up with a whole lot of trouble in the bargain.

Even social agencies have been known to refer people to Holiday Court. It's hardly ideal, moving people vulnerable to drugs and exploitation into a milieu that has plenty of both, but it's all there is.

"We'd like to have services to move people away from these places," says deputy medical health officer Dr. Linda Poffenroth. "Right now we can put them in Pemberton House to detox, but then there are no recovery beds. So they end up back at the Holiday Court. At that point, with the best will in the world, a lot of them aren't going to make it."

There are more admirable things to do for people with addictions than to thrust them into the arms of whichever landlord is willing to make a living from their troubles, leaving sick people to get sicker and neighbourhoods to put up with the fallout. But that's the best we've come up with so far.

Holiday Court will close one day, and depending on where you live and what you believe in, you may or may not view that as a win. But if nothing has been done by then to give the people who live there some hope and a place in the larger community, we'll have accomplished little more than to move the misery elsewhere.

Tear it down and build a proper shelter in its place says Audra Taillefer, of the Prostitute Empowerment and Education Society. Leave it alone until you've got something better, says former Holiday Court manager Max Weeger. Put in a needle exchange, says Kate Thwaites of the Street Outreach Society. Grin and bear it, because everybody needs a home.

"If there was a real will to close it, yes, we could. But then what?" asks Open Door street minister Al Tysick.

"As much as others in the system have complained, we have in fact done nothing. There is no other housing suitable to move these people into. Holiday Court reflects us all, and boy, I wish I'd never said that. Because that's the truth."