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SUPPORT FOR RIVERVIEW AS A NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

The Riverview Horticultural Centre Society (RHCS) was established in 1992 with a goal to protect the trees and landscapes on the grounds of the Riverview Psychiatric Hospital and to establish a public garden and arboretum there. As we learned more about the history of the institutions located on the property, our mission expanded to include protecting its heritage buildings, telling its story to a wider public, and creating a vision for its future. It has been a long and sometimes discouraging campaign but with support from other groups and the City of Coquitlam, the site is now recognized and registered as a significant heritage property. The RHCS Directors are delighted to submit this letter in support of the application to designate Riverview as a National Historic Site. As the Board has access to documents and reports detailing its history and significance, we intend to highlight just a few aspects that seem of particular importance to us.

Our major interest is in the tree collection, which is the legacy of BC's first botanical garden created in 1911 by Henry Esson Young and John Davidson. When the land was first cleared, a landscape architect named G.K. McLean drew up a formal plan for the grounds and purchased stock from a nursery in Surrey which was going out of business. These saplings formed the basis of a nursery, which supplied trees for Government landscaping around the Province until the 1960s. As part of the Botanical Garden project, representative trees were also imported from many parts of the temperate world. With the 1917 hiring of Jack Renton (a Kew -trained gardener from Britain), this work was expanded. Mr. Renton's work was expertly continued by head gardeners Joe Hancock and Bob Elsdon until 1999 when grounds maintenance was contracted out. The appearance of the grounds today with healthy mature trees in artistic groupings is the legacy of these dedicated men.

In 1994, at the urging of the RHCS, and again in 2006, the BC Government contracted arborists to survey the species trees planted at Riverview. Over 1,800 trees were numbered, identified and recorded. (1) The list includes 71 different Genus, 158 Species, and 113 identified varieties. The trees have benefitted from being planted with room to grow in their natural state, with very little pruning. In support letters to our Society, professional arborists have remarked that the collection is unique for its variety and its integration with the buildings and landscape. William Snowden, Director Emeritus of the Niagara Parks Commission wrote, "This collection, because of its diversity and age, certainly should be preserved as a future source of propagation material,

taxonomic study, and definitely a gene pool.” And Jim McGannon, President of the Society of Municipal Arborists wrote, “Examples of trees such as are on this ground are priceless in terms of their aesthetic, educational, and scientific values. This site will be world renowned if it becomes a preserve or education center.” A stroll today among the giants in this 250 acre arboretum will convince visitors that these are not overstatements.

Connected to the landscapes and structures at Riverview is the story of those involved in everything seen there today. From the first land clearing in 1904, patients contributed their labour to the building and operation of the hospital. By 1955 Essondale had grown into a self-sustaining community of 4,700 patients and 2,200 staff, with patients working in the kitchens, laundry, and bakery. Treatment for mental illness often included therapeutic work programs in sewing, upholstery and woodworking where patients repaired and manufactured furniture and uniforms. They also provided gardening and agricultural labour for landscaping and food production. Finnie’s garden, today being restored and maintained by RHCS volunteers, is the legacy of an informal horticultural therapy project in Riverview’s heyday. Labour was also provided by the residents of the Boys Industrial School of Coquitlam, located there from 1921 to 1954 to house and train “incorrigible youth” through work, exercise, good food, and outdoor activity.

As RHCS founding member, Val Adolph, writes, “We reflect with humility that these people, rejected by the society of the day and who were, in the language of the time, “put away in an institution”, are the ones who have given us this treasure that we proudly share with the whole country...” (2) Many of these people were institutionalized for their adult life and today rest in the cemetery at North end of site - small grave markers recording only a name and date of death – their works live on at Riverview.

Riverview’s buildings also represent a rich architectural legacy and some have been evaluated as having major heritage significance. (3) The site’s impressive large buildings are constructed of fire-proof reinforced concrete faced with brick while the smaller buildings that housed doctors, senior staff and their families are solid wood construction with unique floor plans and finishes. An attractive village of large Tudor “cottages” housed the Boys Industrial School. The Henry Esson Young education building includes library space, classrooms, lecture theatres and a residential tower containing 96 residence rooms organized like a university dorm. Pennington Hall, until recently the patient recreation centre, boasts a gymnasium, a cafeteria, and a charming bowling alley featuring hardwood lanes and ball returns. The former Nurses Home buildings are designed in the style of an English country estate and feature oak floors, stenciled beams, coloured glass windows, and a grand fireplace. Above all, the campus-like setting of the buildings among mature trees and shrubs, spacious lawns and narrow winding streets makes the collection of buildings much more valuable than the sum of its parts. The entire property was dedicated to the treatment of mental illness and to horticulture – two activities that existed in harmony and enhanced one another. Riverview represents the evolution of treatment for the mentally ill and a legacy of the pioneers in the field – notably Dr. C.E. Doherty whose cutting edge theories for the

moral treatment of insanity resulted in the abolishment of mechanical and chemical restraint. The site, its structures and artifacts are a museum of psychiatry.

The Riverview property is located in the centre of the Metro Vancouver urban area, easily accessible to a large population and offering outstanding potential for public education and public use of its resources. Part of the property is covered with native vegetation and five streams flow through Riverview to the Coquitlam River and Colony Farm Regional Park. This area provides ideal habitat for birds and wildlife and it is an important link in a green corridor. The community vision for land use at Riverview recommends retaining programs for mental health treatment and research as well as establishing a centre for horticulture and arboriculture. (4) Riverview is also an ideal site for an educational institution, an arts centre, as well as a conference centre with banquet facilities. The current membership of RHCS represents a nucleus of potential active volunteers.

The surrounding municipalities have all passed resolutions calling for the preservation of the Riverview Lands and the community has strongly demonstrated its support in the form of petitions and letters to the Provincial Government: for example between November 2007 and March 2009, 13,555 signatures were presented in the BC Legislature demanding that the Government abandon its plans to develop market housing there. The petition asked in part, that "...the lands be kept in public ownership with services for mental health and wellness; protection of the botanical heritage and ecology of the lands; establishment of centres of research, education and innovation; and opportunities for heritage, arts and culture." To designate Riverview as a National Historic Site would be a decision equally as visionary as the decisions that secured and created it.

This paper was prepared for and approved by the RHCS Board of Directors in support of the City of Coquitlam's application to the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to have the Riverview Lands designated as a National Historic Site. – by Sue Habberger, Director, RHCS July 2010

References:

- (1) Phillips Wuori Long Inc., Alpine Tree Services Ltd. and Brian Fisher, 1994. *Riverview Heritage Tree inventory*, British Columbia Buildings Corporation.
- (2) Adolph, Val and Gillespie, Brenda G., ed. 1994 *The Riverview Lands, Western Canada's First Botanical Garden*, The Riverview Horticultural Centre Society, Coquitlam, B.C.
- (3) F.G. Consultants, 1995 *Riverview Heritage Evaluation*, British Columbia Buildings Corporation.
- (4) Riverview Task Force, 2005 *For the Future of Riverview*, City of Coquitlam Council.