

Green Scene: Is Treefest 2012 a Turning Point?

by Elaine Golds

(published September 7, 2012 – *The TriCity News*)

The future of the Riverview Hospital lands will be hanging in the balance this fall. First, there are two public meetings to review the input and stories received through the Heritage Conservation planning process which took place this past May and June. (Details on these two meetings are at the end of this column). Once the heritage planning process is finalized, attention will then shift to a public discussion regarding possible future uses of the Riverview site. This land use planning process is expected to take place throughout the autumn and go into early 2013. Don't be surprised if a few real estate developers show up to participate.

Riverview certainly holds a place of great significance in the history of our area. Established as a caring and innovative treatment facility for the mentally ill in 1913, patients at Essondale (as it was then called), were given opportunities for fresh air, regular exercise and nutritious food as they assisted at Colony Farm with growing produce and managing prize-winning herds of milk cows, draft horses and sheep. By the 1950s, the patient population had grown to over 4700 people. The hospital, which provided "a home away from home" for many patients, was a source of community pride and employment for local residents. The development of modern drugs led to the gradual downsizing of Riverview's patient population. However, drugs alone will never be a full solution; there is a continuing need for more mental health care beds.

Some patients remain in care on the Riverview site in three new buildings operated by the Fraser Health Authority or as recovering patients from the Forensic Psychiatric Institute Unit in some of the older cottages. However, the last patients cared for under the auspices of Riverview Hospital were officially transferred over the summer. Many people in the community still feel Riverview is an ideal place to provide much needed mental health care services for patients suffering from dementia and other disorders.

This photo of what is now called the West Lawn Building at Riverview was taken about 1913 by BC's first provincial botanist, John Davidson.

Throughout its history, Riverview has always provided close connections with nature. John Davidson, BC's first Provincial Botanist arrived from Scotland in 1911 and immediately started collecting native plants from all over the province. He maintained these plants and studied their growth habits in gardens at Essondale. When Davidson moved to the newly-established University of British Columbia a few years later, he took most of these plants with him to form the foundation of what is now the UBC Botanical Garden. Landscaping on



Essondale's grounds was modeled after traditional English country estates and was initially conducted under the attentive management of Jack Renton who had trained at world-famous Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in England. Renton's influence and that of subsequent master gardeners can still be seen in the careful placement of some of the original trees in Riverview's fabulous tree collection.

While Riverview's tree collection is one of the sites most inspiring attributes, people who come to enjoy the trees often feel it is the magical combination of heritage buildings juxtaposed with thoughtfully planted and interesting tree specimens that creates such a unique experience. The gracious and curvaceous expanses of lawn

continually unfold to reveal new aspects of appealing viewsapes. The changing seasons add even more nuances to Riverview's landscapes. To stroll through the Riverview grounds is to feel first becalmed, then rejuvenated and, finally, ready to once again face the challenges of modern life. It is easy to believe the original designers of Riverview had just such experiences in mind when they designed Riverview to be a special therapeutic and healing place for the mentally ill.

This year, the 19th annual Treefest to celebrate Riverview's trees will take place on Saturday, September 15 from 11am-4 pm. With the unfortunate closure of the buildings, indoor presentations can no longer be given but tree and heritage building tours will continue along with displays from various community groups. Once again, tree tours will be conducted by knowledgeable people such as Doug Justice from the UBC Botanical Garden. In addition, Don Luxton, a Vancouver architect and author with a keen interest in historical buildings will provide an informative walking tour of some of Riverview's most outstanding heritage buildings. For people who are interested in contributing some ideas for Riverview's future uses, these tours will provide an excellent overview of what the site has to offer.

There are two opportunities for the public to review the draft Heritage Conservation Plan for Riverview:

Monday, October 1 (4-8 PM) at The Gathering Place at Leigh Square, 1100 – 2253 Leigh Square Place, Port Coquitlam, and

Tuesday, October 2 (4-8 PM) in the Centennial Room, 620 Poirier Street, Coquitlam