

HOUSING

London will lose if tenants forced to move

A vibrant ethnic community is growing at a substandard apartment complex in northeast London. A proposal to move the tenants rather than upgrade the buildings is no answer. It just points out our inability to deal with the problem.

By Susan Eagle

Surely the tenants of Cheyenne Avenue in London have been through enough. This was the message they gave Sue Herbert, assistant deputy minister to convey to Housing Minister Evelyn Gigantes, when she visited the units in July.

For eight years, the apartment buildings at 75, 85, 95 and 105 Cheyenne Ave. have been the focal point of a battle over substandard housing among frustrated tenants, indifferent landlords and an inadequate standards system.

The tenants, individually and through a tenant's association, have tried to secure decent, affordable housing only to discover that provincial landlord-tenant legislation and municipal bylaws lack the clout to make them worth going to court.

The tenants have discovered that housing laws are made for landlords who voluntarily comply. Those owners who don't can go for years without being brought to justice.

So, the tenants have looked for other solutions.

Under a ministry of housing co-op program, they built and moved into a 75-townhouse complex in southeast London. But the slum housing persisted at the Cheyenne units and the landlords filled the buildings again, this time with an even more vulnerable refugee and immigrant population.

FINDING SOLUTIONS: What is the issue? Basically, there is an inability in the system to deal with housing needs in a comprehensive, holistic way that identifies all the issues, then brings all the partners — municipal, provincial, community and tenants — together to work out viable solutions.

For proof, look no further than the fact the Cheyenne tenants — now part of a growing and vibrant Cambodian

and Vietnamese community — have been told it would be cheaper to build new housing on vacant land, and move the Cambodian and Vietnamese community there, than to demolish and rebuild the existing housing.

Cheaper for whom? Certainly it is cheaper for the ministry of housing, but it is not cheaper for taxpayers or for the tenants.

The ministry cannot guarantee the provision of a nearby school — that's someone else's responsibility.

Nor can the ministry assure the tenants that there will be community services, or access to a facility for classes in English as a second language, or public transit, or proximity to stores and churches — these, too, are someone else's responsibility.

PUT DOWN ROOTS: And what about the price the tenant community pays when the economically expedient solution is to be uprooted and relocated again? All around the Cheyenne apartments Asian newcomers have put down roots and the northeast has become a community and cultural centre.

By comparison, native people have many times described for us the disruption that is experienced when government programs arbitrarily relocate people.

As well, this becomes a planning issue for urban centres and the farm community.

Housing programs that are designed to encourage building on vacant land as the first and, it appears, only option, continually push affordable housing to the edge of cities and gobble up farmland.

And, when all is said and done, the slum housing at the centre of the issue will not have been dealt with. It's a festering sore and a big taxpayer burden, too.

Eight years of bylaw inspections, municipal work orders and court convictions (that netted inconsequential fines) have cost taxpayers plenty.

Then there is the impact on the neighborhood where the slum housing remains. Surely the community deserves better than that.

It is long past time for us to hold our public servants and politicians accountable, change a system that is woefully inadequate and design something that works.

If we move fast enough, we just might protect the lives of some vulnerable residents and save some farmland for future generations.

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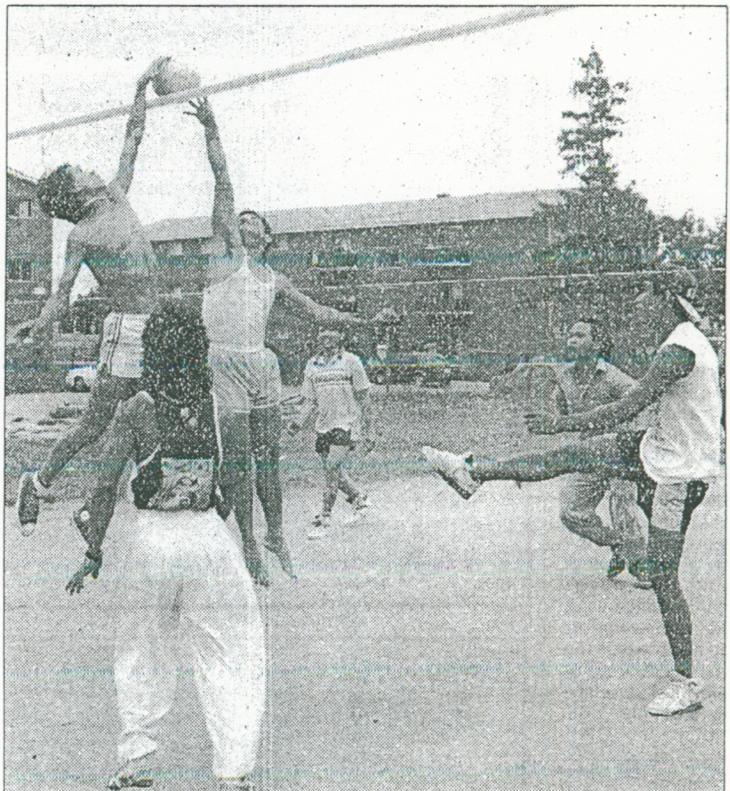


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Sue Reeve/The London Free Press

Like the entangled apartment complex on Cheyenne Avenue where they live, Ny Sok, 8, foreground, is caught in a rope game as Chantre Sonio, left, and Samnang Sok, 10, right, help her. Nearby, volleyball players from the Vietnamese and Cambodian community gather for nightly entertainment in an area adjacent to the Cheyenne apartments, seen behind them.



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