

# Pete McMartin: The gentrification of an empty lot

BY PETE MCMARTIN, VANCOUVER SUN COLUMNIST    MARCH 25, 2013



The empty lot at 557 E. Cordova St. in Vancouver -- the latest battleground in the Downtown Eastside's gentrification war.

**Photograph by:** Mark van Manen, PNG

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VANCOUVER - It is now an empty lot.

It has been an empty lot for years — for at least 25 years, according to the developer.

That vacant lot is this week's ground zero in the gentrification war consuming the Downtown Eastside, a fight that has, of late, been a series of running skirmishes.

One week it's Pidgin restaurant, the next week it's Save-On-Meats Diner. It's classic hit-and-run guerrilla warfare, though shining flashlights in the eyes of upscale diners and stealing a sidewalk sandwich board are more gorilla warfare than serious engagement.

Back to that vacant lot:

The developer, Daniel Boffo of Boffo Properties, wants to build a four-storey condominium development on it. His company assembled the land last year. The lot, which is in what is called the Downtown Eastside Oppenheimer District, comes with restrictions: A percentage of the development must be dedicated to social housing.

Boffo's proposal meets that social housing requirement. Five of the ground-floor units are dedicated to social housing, with the initial plans calling for three to be rented at welfare rates of \$375 a month, and two to be rented at subsidized BC Housing rates of \$840 a month.

The remaining condos are to be sold at market prices — a dozen 600-sq.-ft. condos for \$231,000, and a dozen 1,200- sq.-ft. condos for \$462,000, prices which Boffo claims are the cheapest for new developments in Vancouver. Each condo, including the social housing units, will have access to a communal interior courtyard. It was designed that way to encourage social interaction.

"We worked with city staff closely on this," Boffo said, "so we expect it to be received favourably."

Anti-gentrification activists object to the proposal out of hand: Their argument has consistently been that free-market developers are destroying the fabric of the neighbourhood and driving out the poor and lower-income people who live there. Even the developer's inclusion of social housing in the design isn't enough, they have argued, since the two units to be rented at the BC Housing rates of \$840 a month are still too much.

Yet here is the thing about that:

Those five non-market units are to be purchased at cost by the Community Builders Group, an international non-profit that provides housing for the homeless or those living in substandard housing.

Its headquarters are right here in Vancouver, and it operates four residential buildings of social housing here — three in the Downtown Eastside and one on Granville Street. In all, it provides 253 units to those in need. It could hardly be accused of being a rapacious, neighbourhood-destroying developer.

Here is another thing about Community Builders Group's involvement:

Instead of renting out three of the five social housing units at the welfare rates, it hopes to raise enough capital from donors and such partners as Vancity to allow it to rent out all five units at the \$375-a-month rate.

"I'm in complete support of the development," said Gordon Wiebe, chair of Community Builders Group. "It represents private development of low-income housing, and there's a strong need for it. While social housing is essential in Canada, it is expensive and (government) can't provide all the needs."

Wiebe said he thought the design of the development was just what the neighbourhood needed — a mix of incomes and diversity.

"The detractors of it who say it will lead to the destruction of the neighbourhood and drive out the poorer residents ... In my mind, that's reductionist thinking. Density and diversity will lead, I think, to a revitalized neighbourhood.

"To my mind, that's the future."

He could be right. The development permit board OK'd the Boffo proposal late Monday afternoon.

The Downtown Eastside will now have five new units of social housing, to be rented out at \$375 a month, in the heart of one of the most expensive cities in the world, where once there was a vacant lot.

On to the next battleground.

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Five of 29 units of a condo development proposed for what is now an empty lot at 557 East Cordova Street would be for social housing. Anti-gentrification forces are unhappy about the proposal, which was approved by the development permit board Monday.

