

# north shore news

## OTHER VOICES: Gimme shelter: get serious about student housing

Michael Markwick / North Shore News

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file photo, North Shore News

If Advanced Education Minister Andrew Wilkinson is to be believed, implementing the eminently sensible strategy Capilano University students and their peers province-wide advance to tackle the critical lack of student housing would compromise B.C.'s credit rating.

Who knew that, after an epoch of B.C. Liberal government, our economy was so fragile.

He holds fast to the magical thinking that the overheated housing market will somehow correct the crisis the market has itself created.

Against this dogmatism, the CapU students, led by Jullian Kolstee, advance a business case for on-campus housing that would require Victoria to allow universities to borrow money – mortgages that would be eliminated by student residence fees.

It seems to me, however, that recourse to borrowing may not be immediately necessary. Victoria claws back university surpluses to underwrite the province's credit, even as Premier Christy Clark spends a million dollars on vanity photographs for her social media feeds – to name just one example of this government's unconscionable profligacy.

T. S. Eliot has words to capture the pain the premier has caused: over the past three years, April has been the cruelest month as the Capilano University community reeled from one round of budget cuts to the next. Even as the university eliminated entire programs, it posted surpluses that have ballooned from \$5 million in 2010 to more than \$60 million today.

The human cost of this surplus has been to close off career pathways including studio arts and computer science, deprive students of the courses they need when they need them, and thereby extend the amount of time it takes to complete their studies. The Christy Clark strategy for the university is to use it as part of the collateral for the province's credit rating, a cash cow.

Allowing universities to use their surpluses and borrowing power for the security of students would change the equation for our community. From dramatically reducing the number of cars choking up our roadways and climate, to seeing our students freed from the stranglehold of housing insecurity, and taking a bite out of debilitating student debt.

Making Capilano University a leader in housing security could also bring relief to North Shore residents struggling with hyper inflation in the real estate market and the evaporation of affordable rentals. We could see the university assert its place as the core of a vibrant "creative community," to borrow from urbanist Richard Florida. As he observed in his Sept. 8 talk at the Kay Meek Centre, "human brain power, creativity, is now the principal driver of the economy." Through strategies like community land trusts which take the exorbitant cost of land out of the equation to provide perpetually affordable non-market housing, Capilano University could give the beautiful minds that drive the economy a place to call home.

The ultimate gain would be to assure for British Columbia a happy, democratic and prosperous future, because that will not come to us through an LNG pipeline but only through the genius of our post secondary students.

Through my five years as faculty at Capilano University, I've come to see housing insecurity is taking an ever greater toll on students as they struggle with low wages and exorbitant rents, unstable and at times dangerous living arrangements, and sleeping in their vehicles. I have seen students come to office hours dragging carry-on luggage because they are couch surfing. The Lookout Society's North Shore homeless outreach workers confirm that it is not unusual for them to find our students "camping" in the bush, or staying at the shelter while attending classes.

Aping Christy Clark's devil-take-the-hindmost politics, Minister Wilkinson and his MLA colleagues on the North Shore can somehow sleep at night even as these students sleep without a roof over their heads.

There's a democratic cure for this callousness, and it is less than seven months away.

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