

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE



This study series documents the experiences of supportive housing sites that gained neighbourhood acceptance. The purpose of this research is to help future sites better address neighbourhood concerns at the initial stages of a project. Sharing lessons learned also helps identify strategies to improve relationships with neighbours of existing social housing sites.

A summary report is also available: *Overview of Strategies from Case Studies of Supportive Housing Sites in B.C.*

Community Acceptance Series: Timber Grove, Surrey

Supportive housing provides housing and support services to people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness. These support services help vulnerable people maintain their housing. Supports can include: 24/7 staffing, life skills training, employment preparation, meal programs and referrals to other community resources. BC Housing works in partnership with non-profit societies who operate the housing projects and provide on-site supports to the residents.

In 2014, BC Housing conducted a research study looking at five supportive housing projects for homeless people or people at risk of homelessness that were initially met by concern from their surrounding neighbours. In some cases, these projects were the first of their kind in these neighbourhoods. Over time, initial concerns from some community members developed into positive relationships.

Project Background

Timber Grove was developed through a partnership between the Province of B.C., the City of Surrey, **Fraser Health** and **Coast Mental Health**. The project, operational in 2011, provides 52 affordable rental studio apartments for seniors and people with disabilities at-risk of homelessness. The modular units for this three-storey project were originally used as temporary athletes' housing in Whistler during the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Games.



*Timber Grove Surrey,
front entrance*



This study examines:

- › The types of concerns raised by neighbours of supportive housing developments and whether these concerns change over time, specifically from site proposal to after site occupation
- › Strategies and actions taken by housing providers to address concerns and build positive relationships with neighbours
- › The number of police calls in the neighbourhood before and after site opening
- › Lessons learned from this project

Project Background *continued from p1*

Operated by Coast Mental Health in partnership with Fraser Health, this project provides 24/7 staff coverage and on-site services including: a meal program, job skills training and other support services.

Many residents have mental health issues and are recovering from addictions. Timber Grove residents must be in recovery as this site does not permit active addiction.

Before becoming supportive housing, the City of Surrey-owned site was an unoccupied bog area presenting both pros and challenges to supportive housing site development.

| SITE PROS | SITE CHALLENGES |
|------------------------------|---|
| Could be accessed quickly | Rezoning was required for residential construction |
| Could be accessed at no cost | The wet bog site made construction difficult |
| Level building site | Wildlife impact tests were needed prior to site development |

Methodology

BC Housing’s Research and Corporate Planning conducted research for these five case studies by collecting data through the following methods:

- › Interviews with housing provider representatives from each supportive housing site

- › Working with local police departments, gathered data showing the number of police calls for each case study neighbourhood comparing before and after project opening

Neighbours

One side of the building faces a walking path while the other sides are surrounded by multi-unit residential homes. Neighbours mostly own their homes. There are strip malls, box stores, and fast food restaurants located within a 10-15 minute walk from the site, as well as the Surrey Central Skytrain Station, Central City Shopping Centre and Simon Fraser University Surrey Campus. There are some schools in the area too.

Neighbour Concerns

Neighbours raised concerns immediately upon hearing about the project. Those most concerned lived in the residential building next to the site. In early 2009, to get a sense of neighbourhood support and concerns, statistics were collected at the first public consultation. The meeting was attended by 41 neighbours, 20 per cent expressing project support. Others raised several concerns about the location of the supportive housing site including:

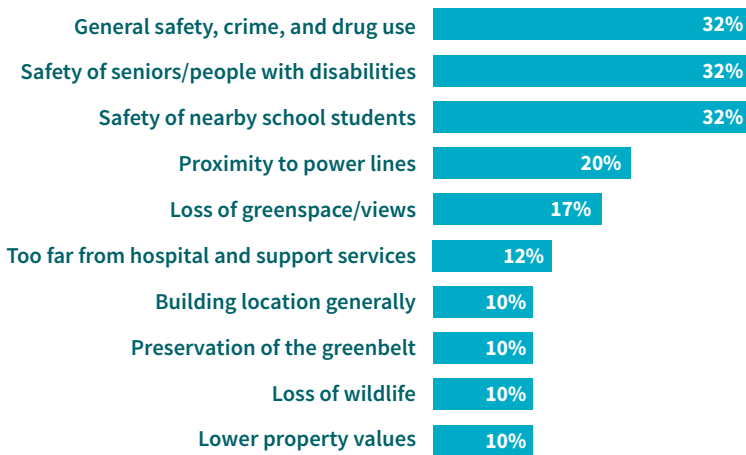
- › Proximity to a school
- › Neighbourhood consists of many seniors and people with disabilities
- › Loss of green space and wildlife due to bog site construction



- › Site proximity to power lines
- › Considered too far from the hospital and other support services

Many concerns focused on the general safety of existing residents. Some neighbours believed the project’s target client-resident group would increase crime and drug use in the area.

Figure 1: Top Concerns Expressed at the First Timber Grove Public Consultation



Source: Coast Mental Health (2009)

There were some complaints from neighbours during Timber Grove construction. Complaints mostly involved the location of construction worker parking and building site tree placement.

How Neighbours Expressed Concerns

Prior to site opening, neighbours expressed concerns many ways. Approximately 10 neighbours formed a community association to oppose the development of Timber Grove. This group was formed from the group of attendees from the first open house in early 2009.

The community association met with city councillors and the mayor to express their concerns about Timber Grove. They also sent letters to neighbours and media, outlining their project concerns, creating a lot of fear about the project in the community.

Due to the efforts of the community association, over 200 people participated in the rezoning hearing in July 2009 to voice their opposition to the project. Despite this, the community association disbanded after the rezoning application was approved October 2009.

Strategies to Build Positive Relationships During Development

Several strategies were used, and information provided, to create opportunities for neighbours to provide input, express their concerns and achieve buy-in.

For example, Coast Mental Health and the project partners hosted an open house at a local church for neighbours at the end of February 2009, right after Coast Mental Health was awarded the contract to manage the site. The purpose of the open house was to share site plans, collect information about neighbour concerns and respond to community questions. More than 40 neighbours attended.

Based on concerns voiced at the open house, Coast Mental Health worked with project partners to clearly define behavior qualifications for new site residents.¹

At the open house, Coast Mental Health committed to creating a community advisory committee (CAC) to meet during site development and afterward, continuing once the site was occupied. Beginning in 2010, CAC meetings were held four times a year. Though some meetings were tense, this committee was important, creating a forum for neighbours to voice their concerns and get honest answers. CAC members included representatives from Coast Mental Health, BC Housing, Fraser Health, City of Surrey, community police, local charities and neighbours. There was no quota on the number of neighbourhood participants. Once the building opened, CAC continued to meet semi-annually, meeting some residents and providing lists of incidents and resolutions. At the time research for this study was conducted, CAC was considering moving to annual meetings as fewer issues were coming up for discussion.

¹ The resident profile was written into the zoning by-law when the site rezoning application was approved.



Coast Mental Health took the issues raised at CAC very seriously. For example, neighbours in the building next door were concerned the new building was too close to their site. In this case, there was space on the site allowing the structure to be moved closer to the greenway, creating more space between the building and its neighbour. Trees and a new fence were added for more privacy for neighbours living next door. The parking lot was also moved from the original location to the other side of the building, giving neighbours more space.

Since this was the first time Coast Mental Health would be operating in Surrey, tours for neighbours to see their Vancouver-based supportive housing sites were organized. Neighbours had an opportunity to meet the residents, see the support services provided by Coast Mental Health and witness the calm atmosphere at the housing sites. While these tours were well-received by neighbours, concerns remained about the impact of the Timber Grove project for their neighbourhood.

Coast Mental Health felt another important strategy was partnering with Fraser Health. In addition to the Coast Mental Health staff on-site 24/7, Fraser Health provides support services to residents with offices at Timber Grove. The Fraser Health partnership helped achieve community buy-in, as neighbours were pleased to hear that residents would get additional supports from an organization they know and trust.

Throughout the development process, Coast Mental Health and the project partners were available to answer questions from neighbours. Coast Mental Health created a hotline for neighbours to call to address questions or concerns. Issues and complaints were quickly addressed and rumors were cleared up right away, creating an open communication channel that addressed concerns. Coast Mental Health and project partners also ensured questions were answered honestly and that project partners were on the same page using consistent messaging.

Coast Mental Health and project partners clearly communicated the site staffing model and safety features to help ease neighbours' concerns. Police were pleased that the plans for the site included 24/7 staff coverage and additional street lighting.

Strategies to Build Positive Relationships after Opening

To maintain on-going positive relationships with neighbours:

- › Coast Mental Health holds regular open houses at Timber Grove for neighbours
- › CAC meetings are semi-annual or annual to ensure there is a place to air and address any emerging concerns
- › All residents must sign a crime-free addendum, setting out expectations around being good neighbours
- › Timber Grove contributes to neighbourhood safety by serving as a Block Watch centre (because they have 24/7 staff on-site)
- › Neighbours can call on-site staff to report concerns, which are promptly addressed
- › Security cameras are located inside and outside Timber Grove monitoring residents' behaviour. Any concerning activities are addressed immediately.

Challenges

Project development was rushed because the modular units had to be removed from their original Whistler site by May 2010. This left 15 months to define the client group and collect approvals, including rezoning the site, before accepting the units at the Surrey site. This meant short timelines for community consultations. As well, certain site development activities had to happen in advance of the rezoning hearing to allow the units to be transferred from Whistler on time. For example, because the area was previously a bog with trees, they had to conduct a bird inventory and remove the raptor nests well in advance of the units' arrival. This advanced work may have given neighbours the impression that the rezoning decision was a done deal before the public hearing. The tight timelines also meant there was little time to prepare project site selection messaging.

Though Surrey has the second largest homeless population in Metro Vancouver (according to Metro Vancouver homeless counts), the community did not have any supportive housing projects for people who were homeless or at-risk of homelessness with additional barriers such as mental health



conditions or recovering from addictions. Lack of experience with this form of housing contributed to some of the concerns.

Another factor, not many Surrey service providers spoke out in support of Timber Grove at public consultations. Though Coast Mental Health has been providing support services and housing to people with serious mental illness since 1974, Timber Grove was the organization's first time providing services and housing in Surrey. Having trusted service providers in the community speak out about the benefits and need for this type of housing project could have helped inform public discussions.

Current Relationship with Neighbours

Timber Grove now blends into the neighbourhood. It was reported that many neighbours show support for the project, including those who were formerly opposed to it during the development phase. At first, there were some complaints from neighbours as residents settled into their new homes, but these tapered off. It was also reported that residents are proud of their home, engaging with neighbours and frequenting local shops and restaurants.

Lessons Learned to Address Neighbour Concerns

- › **Expect and be prepared for project opposition**
- › **Take neighbours' concerns seriously and address specific issues right away**
- › **Ensure sufficient time for public consultation is built into the project timelines**
- › **Set up a community advisory committee early in the project to create a forum for concerns to be heard**
- › **Having a facilitated community consultation process is helpful**
- › **Ensure clear language and messaging to describe the client group**
- › **Using a site pre-designated for housing, rather than one that needs to be rezoned, limits debate**
- › **Neighbours were more concerned about residents with addictions, rather than those with mental health issues**
- › **An attractive housing site helps projects blend into neighbourhoods quickly; also creating a sense of pride for residents**



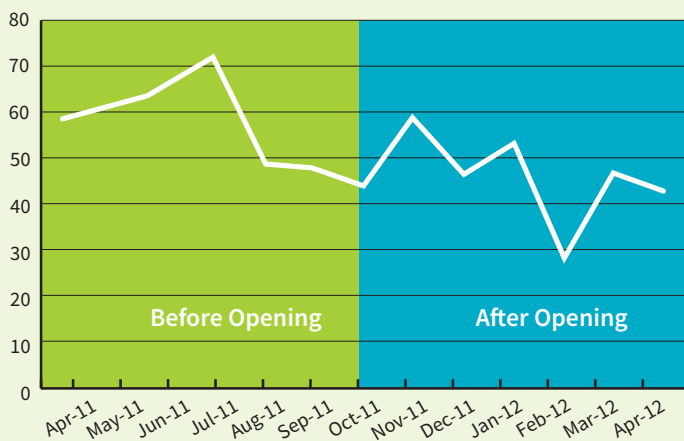
Police Calls Before and After Opening



in police calls between the periods 6 months prior and 6 months post opening

In the six months before Coast Mental Health opened Timber Grove, there were 351 calls to the police. In the six months after project opening, the call number dropped to 273.

Figure 2: Number of Calls to Police in the Timber Grove, (Coast Mental Health) Neighbourhood Before and After Site Opening



Source: SurreyPolice Department, 2014

Data Limitations

- 1) Police call data was requested for the neighbourhood around the case study sites. Neighbourhood boundary definitions vary by police department.
- 2) Key informant interviews were limited to representatives from each of the case study sites. Most other stakeholder groups, such as neighbours, other community members, funders and tenants were not consulted for this study. While this limits study reliability, the key informants selected played a lead role in all aspects of the development and operations, providing valuable, comprehensive insights and perspectives. Clear common themes emerged across the case study sites supporting the validity of the case studies. Quantitative data from police departments also aligned with comments from key informants. Further research could be done to broaden the scope of stakeholders consulted to further validate the views expressed by those consulted for this report.
- 3) The case studies in this series only explore the experience of supportive housing sites that have achieved successful community integration. In the future, additional case studies could be conducted with supportive housing providers that have not fully achieved community acceptance. This would help measure the effectiveness of some of the strategies proposed in this report and identify additional lessons learned for future community integration best practices.

More Information:

To find out more, visit BC Housing's Research Centre at www.bchousing.org to find the latest workshops, research and publications on the key challenges and successes in building and operating affordable, sustainable housing.

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