

Senior Housing or Public Housing?



by Peter McGuigan,
Editorial contributor

About five years ago, Tory Housing Minister Peter Christie called a meeting at the Lord Nelson Hotel. He stunned the audience of tenants by announcing henceforth seniors' housing would be defined public housing. That is, the manors would be used not only for those who were aged and poor, but also for anyone who needed housing, even if they were not that close to 65, even if they did not have a good housing record, even if they had criminal records, or marked addictions, or severe debts. Needless to say there was consternation, but the minister didn't hear it. He left immediately.

Senior Housing was established after the demise of the South Street Poor House in 1970. The first seniors' manor was Sunrise in Gottingen. Gone was the Victorian concept of a work house.

No longer were the mentally ill going to be housed with the poor and old, no more would the inmates be locked in overnight, no longer would they sleep in open sex separated wards, no longer would families and children be housed in a massive brick building.

Now, there would be bachelor apartments, a bit too small for couples, but couples there are. There would be a common lounge for social activities, for meetings with Metro Housing, with political officials, for religious services, and even polling booths. There would be a parking lot as many healthier could afford cars since the rent was 25%, (now 30%) of ones' gross income, usually derived from the old age pension etc. This income was sufficient as long as one's health were good and all those "co-paid" drugs were not needed. In Joe Howe, the automobiles are recent, including at last one van and two Volvos. There all places are taken so there is no guest parking. In Sunrise there are empty lots.

Most people in public housing are seniors, but there are some in their 50s or early 60s. Most of the latter have low paid or part

time jobs such as secretaries, writers, newspaper deliverers and crossing guards, but the poorest have only welfare so often collect bottles or panhandle.

Although many don't have a lot of formal education, there are also at least two lawyers, both of whom had problems handling money, among other things. There are also a pharmacist, a United Church minister and a former Catholic nun. There are reformed alcoholics, one of whom says sadly "it'll always be in me." Others can't seem to stop drinking, one started again after 21 years on the wagon. Also, too many smoke, some are trying hard to overcome it; others aren't, although sometimes it's literally bankrupting or even killing them. Smokers are now limited to their apartments, or the exterior of the building. (The smoking rooms are gone, due to anti-smoking legislation.)

Social life is what you make it. At Joe Howe there are card games, bingo, Saturday night movies, weekly dinners, occasional, not very successful dances due to a dearth of men, exercise classes, all in the main lounge. Often these are

encouraged by Metro officials. Smaller groups meet informally in the small lounges located on each floor, or in the

chairs near the main floor elevators. A few attend classes at the public library, often give by Saint Mary's University, but most seem indifferent to education. Trips to the Caribbean or the Grand Tour of Europe are generally out, but summer trips within the Maritimes are common. Also, at Christmas many stay with their families, who may be out of town, so not much happens then in the manors.

Joe Howe has a shady backyard with benches and swings. Here are the summer holiday barbeques and the informal meeting of groups on warm evenings. Especially in winter, Sobeys next door is a convenience for both Joe Howe and nearby McKeen. Considerable socialization also occurs at Sobeys coffee area. Sobeys also supplies non-alarmed carts for the residents. In Joe Howe these are kept locked away in the basement and only are available to residents.

Children often visit. A number of them are better off than their parents, teachers being common.

The children also usually clear the apartments after their parents die, sometimes sharing furniture with the former neighbours. For those who move in with little more than a sleeping bag, slightly beaten, even good furniture and clothing is often found in the garbage room. Also, in the South End, during the spring, students leave, abandoning furniture and TV's in the surrounding streets. But this may introduce bedbugs, the bane of apartments generally.

People tend to help each other, the younger help the older, picking up their groceries, clearing the snow from their cars, helping those who can't help themselves; many will talk to and encourage the disheartened, call for help in emergencies.

Some buildings don't yet have resident managers. But having a good resident manager enables Metro Housing to be efficient at the local level. Otherwise there is no cleaning of messes made on the weekends, or after the regular guy leaves at 4pm. In the winter, the elevators floors are salt stained and old leaves are tracked into the halls. Salt may not be spread on the icy

sidewalks or parking lots on time, and if the firefighters or cops have to get in, there is no manager, no master key; doors will be ruined by a door spreader. And no one will be there to clean up those broken beer bottles left by passing students; no one is here to enforce the no engine idling rule.

Given that there may be those who have served time lurking among these seniors, residents are well advised to keep their doors locked when away for "just minutes" at the laundry on each floor, or talking in the floor lounge. Surprising, too many take a chance. In Joe Howe, however, most of the losses have been from the lockers. Once, however, really bold thieves stole the TV from the main lounge by posing as repair guys. Nobody checked for a work order.

There is also a real difference in the quality of life in the manors, depending on their neighbourhoods. The ones on Gottingen have reputations for drugs, while those in the South End, though not without problems, tend to be better. This means that some who were offered northern ones first, refused. They moved into either Joe Howe or McKeen.

Recently, Joe Howe has come into government development money. It was proposed to replace the furniture in the main lounge. Given that much of that is still good, some money might have been directed to the floor lounges where the tendency is toward rattiness. Also, because furniture tends to walk, the government is not buying much. But we got some new furniture for the main lounge, a shuffleboard, Wii, money for Sunday coffee and cookies etc.

The manor concept of senior housing is a vast improvement over the Poor House. Most of the mentally ill are housed elsewhere, and despite Christie, the system does not seem quite overwhelmed by ex cons, alcoholics and druggies, so the residents live peacefully with little fear, at least in the South End manors.

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