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Newfoundland & Labrador Chapter

FIVE-NINE ON ROOSEVELT CONDOMINIUMS

NEW LIFE IN A HISTORIC STRUCTURE

BY MARK GRAESSER

Five-Nine on Roosevelt comprises 24 apartment units in a redeveloped building on the northern (upper) side of Pleasantville. It is situated on generous grounds on all sides, with wooded buffers on two sides and views toward Quidi Vidi Lake and the hills beyond.

The building was constructed in 1957 as a high school for American dependents in the waning years of the Fort Pepperill Air Force base. It is a brick-clad steel and concrete structure, reputedly built to provide shelter from a nuclear attack if necessary. By 1960 the building was vacated by the Americans and granted to the provincial government. In 1968 it was re-purposed as the Children's Rehabilitation Centre, providing hospital and outpatient therapy for victims of polio and other disabilities. When this function was transferred to the newly built Janeway Hospital in 2001, the building again became vacant. In 2006 the Gilbraltar Development Corporation acquired the property, and re-developed it as a complex of varied and stylish condominium apartments. These have been occupied since late 2007. The owner governed corporation assumed control in mid-2008.

Arranged on three levels in two wings, the units in Five-Nine on Roosevelt range from 800 to 1,875 sq. ft. in area. The majority contain two bedrooms in 1,000 to 1,300 sq. ft. Configurations vary, as the architect fit units within former classroom, laboratory, and cafeteria spaces. Three loft style units have two levels in the former gymnasium. Again, reflecting the original institutional standards, ceilings range from 9 to 16 feet in height, creating an unusually spacious feel for condo apartments. Many units have large pantry, and storage areas. Condo fees are prorated according to the area of the unit.

Apart from two entrance lobbies, the principal common amenities are a modest fitness room which doubles as a meeting space, and storage lockers for all units. Parking is exterior, with one or two spaces per unit. The building is surrounded by lawns and trees, some a legacy from the original development and others added by Gibraltar. The Corporation and individual owners (by arrangement with the Board) have augmented the landscaping with new trees, shrubs, and perennial borders.

Given its location and treed surroundings, the building has a semi-rural and secluded feel, and a principal amenity is immediate access to the Virginia River walking trail leading to Quidi Vidi Lake. A scenic walk downtown takes about 30 minutes.

About two-thirds of the units are owner occupied, most of the owners regarding Five-Nine as their long-term home. A

majority of owners as well as some long-term renters are retirees leading an active lifestyle, and many spend extended periods elsewhere, especially in the winter. Owners, but not tenants, are permitted to keep pets. There is a neighbourly sense of camaraderie, but no sense of institutional closeness among the residents.

Governance

Virtually all of the Five-Nine original owners were first time condo owners when the corporation was handed over by the developer ten years ago, so they and their successors faced a substantial learning curve. There was a high turnover of board members initially, and there was uncertainty about such basic matters as record keeping, insurance, and the respective roles of the board and the management company. However, governance stabilized with a five-member board serving staggered three-year terms. Most current members have been re-elected for one or more terms, so there is considerable collective depth of experience. On the other hand, current board members are concerned about over-reliance by owners on a small, core governance group.

Five-Nine management is a hybrid of the professional management and self-managed, co-operative models. From inception the corporation has contracted with Martek for professional management services. Martek's primary role has been to implement financial operations and to assist with contracting for major services such as snow removal, lawn care, elevator and alarm systems maintenance, etc. Martek has also assisted with finding suitable professional advice and contractors to deal with major repairs.

The board monitors these functions and maintains a close independent eye on finances. With no resident manager, all day-to-day on-site functions are handled by the board, with individual directors taking care of specific duties. Relations with owners and tenants are handled directly by the board, as are most relations with service providers. Volunteer owners and tenants assist with landscaping and minor maintenance tasks.

Most of the board's work occurs in the period from May to December. During that time, meetings are held monthly. During the winter months several board members spend extended periods out of the province. The by-law includes a provision allowing for formal decisions to be made by email if necessary, but most immediate issues can be handled by one or more directors who remain in residence.

In general, the corporation has been well managed, with few specific complaints from owners as the board has worked through significant repair issues and resulting financial challenges. In large part, this may be because the board has operated in a highly transparent manner. Board minutes (excluding matters where privacy must be respected) go to all owners following approval, and substantial written explanations go to owners with the annual budget and prior to votes on by-law amendments or a special assessment.

Issues

The corporation established a reserve fund in 2008, and funded it according to guidelines contained in a 2012 reserve fund study. However, that study failed to anticipate early deterioration of some components of the redevelopment within the following five years. In particular, the asphalt shingled roof reached a condition in 2017 which will require its replacement in 2018. The reserve fund balance was insufficient to cover this expense, so owners agreed to a special assessment to cover a portion of the cost.

This was a cautionary experience for the board. In commissioning an updated reserve fund study in late 2017, the board selected a provider who completed a more comprehensive and rigorous study than the 2012 version. The outcome was a tripling of annual contributions to the reserve fund, which necessitated a sizable increase in fees for 2018 and future years. The fund will now be in a much stronger position to cover expected capital costs, some of them newly identified in the recent study.

A rather different issue confronted the board in 2016, when an investor-owned unit was listed on Airbnb for short-term rental. Any pattern of a hotel style occupancy would be completely inimical to the quiet, secure atmosphere expected by most owners and long-term tenants. Fortunately, the declaration and by-laws explicitly prohibit rentals for periods less than three months, and the use of units for any commercial purpose. These rules were promptly enforced by the board; the unit was de-listed , with the owner required to absorb the board's legal costs. ■

Mark Graesser has been a resident of Five-Nine on Roosevelt since 2008, and president of the corporation since 2010. He taught political science at Memorial University for thirty years. He now divides his time between St. John's and Nelson, New Zealand. In both locations he is engaged in hiking and conservation activities, as well as historical research and writing.