

Developers sprouting gardens

SOMETIME DURING LAST summer's civic strike a Tex-Mex rib joint named Carlos 'N Bud's disappeared from the corner of Pacific and Seymour and a most amazing transformation took place. The building's rubble was removed and was replaced with top soil and fencing. Sixty community garden plots were created.

The land owner, Onni Developments, formed a partnership with an activist community group called Vancouver Public Spaces Network (VPSN). VPSN is in charge of handing out the gardening spaces. And a number of those plots are already sprouting what appear to be onions and crocuses.

Community gardens are not new. They have spread across the city for years, particularly along the old CPR line along Sixth Avenue on the West Side. Then there is Strathcona Gardens east of Main. According to the city, Vancouver now has about 23 community gardens where people can grow their own vegetables and plants.

But what Onni is up to is something relatively new. It represents a move by developers to catch a green wave and make gardens a marketable amenity like swimming pools or health clubs.

This trend has two parts. The first part is using vacant private space for public use until the development goes ahead. Onni has created its garden in the downtown core, and Park Lane Homes has set aside an acre of land on the South Fraser Lands.

The garden at Seymour and Pacific is not an altogether altruistic move according to Chris Evans, Onni's vice-president in charge of de-

allen garr

The addition of community gardens represents a move by developers to catch a green wave and make gardens a marketable amenity like swimming pools or health clubs.

velopment. With Vancouver's homeless crisis, leaving vacant buildings standing inevitably leads to squatters and public safety problems. Putting what Evans estimates at about \$100,000 into creating the garden avoids that headache and burnishes the developer's image.

It's a significant improvement in land use over what we see now all across the city where lots sit vacant and surrounded by chain link fences for years and do nothing more than grow weeds and collect trash that is tossed their way.

But neither Onni nor Park Lane is committing its garden space forever. This brings us to the second part of the plan. Onni's community garden will only exist for one or two growing seasons or until the development permit is approved for condos. But part of that condo development will include garden space available

for the condo owners or tenants in that building. That garden space, by the way, won't be at ground level. It will be several stories in the air on the building's podium at the base of the tower.

This is an advance on the concept of green roofs which are passive spaces where access to the public is usually prohibited, like the green roof at the main branch of Vancouver's Public Library. These new garden spaces will be set up to encourage people to plant their own flowers and veggies.

Onni is not the first developer to sell gardens as a plus in their building. According to city senior social planner Vicki Morris, the pioneers, Magellan Developments, kicked off this trend a couple of years ago with their Freesia building at Seymour and Helmcken. They have another project, Atelier on Homer Street, which will also include garden plots.

Morris says this added amenity appeals to owners in their 20s and 30s who want to live in the hustle and bustle of downtown but also want to have a back-to-the-land experience of growing their own food without leaving the city.

This spring the city will introduce a new urban agriculture policy based on work started under the former COPE/Vision council. It will strongly encourage more of these types of gardens. But there will be no benefits, like density bonuses, offered in return. Developers, like Chris Evans who was involved in developing the city policy, say that's just fine.

Going green, it seems, is its own reward.

agarr@vancouverier.com