

With CASH gone, B.C. homeowners lose a strong voice

Provincial group gone, but national voice remains

BY SUZANNE MORPHET, SPECIAL TO THE SUN APRIL 30, 2011

B.C. homeowners lost something special last month: a watchdog they could call their own.

The Consumer Advocacy and Support for Homeowners Society - better known as CASH - called it a day after almost 11 years of advocating on behalf of B.C. homeowners.

The news isn't necessarily bad. While CASH is gone, its assets and one of the people behind it have joined forces with a national housing organization: Canadians for Properly Built Homes.

In dissolving their organization, CASH directors hoped that becoming part of a bigger and better-funded organization would continue to raise awareness and result in better legislation and public policy without duplicating efforts.

As past president John Grasty told me, most housing issues in B.C. are common to other provinces. For instance, in Ontario, homeowners have been complaining that defects aren't being covered by the government's new-home warranty program.

The danger of being part of a national organization, of course, is that B.C. politicians may feel less heat. Over the last decade, CASH has tackled issues of widespread concern to homeowners here. Losing that loud, local voice could hurt.

Some of you may not remember CASH's roots; it began as an informal organization focusing on the leaky condo crisis at the turn of the last decade. In fact, CASH originally stood for Compensation and Accountability to Soaked Homeowners. But fairly quickly, it became incorporated as a non-profit society dealing with many other issues affecting homeowners.

It had successes and failures. Educating homeowners was CASH's biggest accomplishment, according to Grasty; he says the organization's website received no fewer than 10,000 hits a month, including many from government.

Over the years, CASH helped countless homeowners deal with builders and warranty-providers to get their homes fixed. Also popular were its Buyer Beware seminars, held in communities throughout B.C.

Remember when the government planned to introduce no-fault insurance, soon after the Liberals were elected in 2001? CASH joined the Coalition Against No Fault in B.C. to put the brakes on all forms of no-fault legislative changes, fearing they could hurt homeowners and prevent victims from recovering financially from their losses.

Though homeowners have been more informed, individual homeowners have received desperately

needed support, and no-fault legislation went nowhere, CASH was unable to accomplish all it hoped for. Take the leaky condo crisis, its original raison d'être. CASH hoped to have the crisis declared a disaster in the hope of getting financial assistance from Ottawa. During the 2001 election campaign, then-NDP premier Ujjal Dosanjh wrote Ottawa seeking help under Emergency Preparedness Canada, but the winning Liberals declined to follow up, saying the crisis didn't qualify under federal relief legislation.

And in 2009, CASH was helpless to do anything when the government abruptly cancelled its no-interest loan program, even though a report prepared for the Homeowner Protection Office estimated that only about 20 per cent of the estimated 160,000 leaky strata units had been repaired.

I'm not suggesting CASH was ineffective. For an organization run totally by volunteers and often depending on money from its directors' own pockets, it gave homeowners a strong collective voice. But what's become clear in the last decade is that the challenges facing homeowners, particularly owners of new homes, are relentless.

Fortunately for homeowners, Grasty will still be around -no doubt as outspoken as ever -in his role as a volunteer member of the advisory council to Canadians for Properly Built Homes and through his own blog, realestateevolved.com.

Suzanne Morphet reads mail, but does not give advice, at condocolumn@shaw.ca

© Copyright (c) The Vancouver Sun