

# City taxpayers in deep to buy out more homeowners on shaky ground in Orléans

*The Sunland Drive saga has hung over the community for 14 years, ever since some homeowners made claims against the city for damage to their properties.*

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Sunland Drive homes in Orleans,. PHOTO BY JEAN LEVAC /Postmedia News

Until a few days ago, Mike Wolf was the only resident of an 18-unit bunch of rowhouses, the last one to vacate the homes after a rare multimillion-dollar acquisition of properties by the City of Ottawa in response to complaints about structure damage related ground settlement.

“I liked that place,” Wolf said Wednesday on the front stoop of his new home, which is just around the corner on Lauzon Street.

He bought the Sunland Drive home in 2007. It was the first home he purchased.

But when the city told homeowners in 2019 that it would acquire more properties impacted by bad ground conditions related to a deep city-owned sewer, Wolf knew he would be getting out.

“They made us an offer we couldn’t refuse,” Wolf said.

The Sunland Drive saga has hung over the community for 14 years, ever since some homeowners made claims against the city for damage to their properties.

The trunk sewer runs under Sunland Drive and crosses a residential block to Orchardview Avenue. The city discovered that when the sewer was constructed by the former Cumberland township in the 1980s, workers reused marine clay to fill the excavation, leading to the ground shifting, along with the homes on it.

The city initially acquired 10 homes believing it could remedy the ground problems, repair the homes and put the properties on the market to recoup the costs.

But more homeowners on Sunland Drive contacted the city with complaints about house damage, asking for a similar property buyout or compensation.

In May 2019, council members received an update behind closed doors about the status of the Sunland Drive debacle, hearing about the risk of being sued by homeowners and the impact of remediation work to other homeowners in the same blocks of rowhouses. It led to a larger acquisition plan, one that would raze the homes and build anew.

The city’s acquisition involves 20 homes in total. In addition to the 18 rowhomes on Sunland Drive, the city bought two single-family homes on nearby Orchardview Avenue.

City taxpayers are on the hook for millions of dollars to buy and demolish the homes, restore the land and monitor the stability of the soil.

Acquiring the latest 10 homes cost about \$3.6 million, but the city on Wednesday didn’t have available the final purchase costs of the initial 10 homes, plus the cost of any additional fees.

In 2013, this newspaper reviewed an internal city report from 2009 that authorized the purchase of eight homes for \$2.2 million. That report also described a subsequent \$1.3 million in work done on those homes, back when the city thought it could repair and flip them.

Today, the city estimates that demolishing the 20 homes and restoring the land will cost about \$1.7 million, which includes a \$100,000, 20-metre-wide pathway where the sewer cuts across the residential block.

So, the total cost of the Sunland Drive dilemma could be in the \$10-million range.

Council is expected next Wednesday to sign off on demolishing the homes as part of a long-term plan to sell the properties to a homebuilder via the city-owned Ottawa Community Lands Development Corp.

Until now, most of the city's plans for the Sunland Drive and Orchardview Avenue properties haven't been made public because of the legal claims.

The silence has annoyed other residents who want to know more about the city's intentions, especially since the plans will bring development nuisances during demolition and construction.

Flyers appeared in mailboxes this week inviting residents to a Facebook group to discuss the city's plans, but there has been no formal communication lately from the city, residents said.

"I'd like to know what's going on other than just 'visit us on Facebook'," Jocelyn Lafleche said on his driveway on Lauzon Street, which is behind the city-acquired homes on Sunland Drive.

"I'd like more information because they don't communicate at all," said Pierre Lepine, who also lives on Lauzon Street.

Homeowners living near the path of the sewer are worried about soil conditions damaging their houses, too.

Lepine said he was considering hiring a home inspector to record information about his house to use as baseline data in case there are more ground settlement issues in the future.

The area has been without a full-time city council representative since former Cumberland ward councillor Stephen Blais was elected the MPP for Orléans in February's provincial byelection. The city hasn't sorted out when, or if, there will be a byelection for Cumberland ward.

Orléans Coun. Matthew Luloff has been one of the councillors helping with Cumberland ward issues in the meantime. He agreed that the city has to improve communications with residents in the neighbourhood and has asked the city to hand-deliver letters laying out its intention for the 20 properties.

"I can't stand when people in the community feel like they're out of the loop, especially on something like this," Luloff said.

"We get it. The city has acquired these properties and this work needs to be done, but we also have a duty to remain responsible to those affected by construction traffic and what will essentially become a project that changes the face of an established neighbourhood for the foreseeable future. I'm asking staff to do better and put themselves in the shoes of the residents in the area."