Children's laughter buoys neighbourhood

Daycare moves next to seniors

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Jennifer Amundson spent four years trying to convince her grandfather the daycare being built beside his seniors lodge wouldn't be too noisy.

Then after the kids moved in this spring, she found him making faces through the fence with the children.

"He said it was the greatest thing," said Amundson, laughing.

The 74-year-old still won't admit he likes the fact the Greater Edmonton Foundation included Primrose Place daycare in the recent expansion to its Ottewell facility.

But she sees the difference in his demeanour.

"Old people, we can be crabby and moody, have our bad days," said Fay Shyan, another resident of Ottewell Place Lodge, who can see the children outside her main floor suite.

"It's good to see the little ones go out and enjoy themselves. It makes my feeling inside more relaxed and peaceful. You just feel so much younger."

In Ottewell, the Greater Edmonton Foundation achieved what many communities dream of, a redevelopment that brings people together to meet the needs of a maturing community.

See LAUGHER page A2
Young, old neighbours in Ottewell

LAUGHER
Continued from page A1

Most of Edmonton’s older neighbourhoods were built with predominantly single family homes that once housed a lot of stay-at-home mothers and enough children to keep the neighbourhood school bursting.

But as people in those homes age, it can be tough to keep a neighbourhood vibrant and evolving.

Many neighbourhoods lack seniors housing, space for daycares and commercial amenities within walking distance, and are losing their community schools.

Communities are looking for ways to save those schools and turn the ones they can’t save into other kinds of community hubs. The Ottewell facility gives them hope that’s possible.

“It’s about meeting the needs of our membership from early childhood right to seniors,” said Lana Brenneis, a mother and businesswoman who’s helping lead an effort in Greater Hardisty.

The effort started as a fight to save St. Gabriel Catholic School, but evolved into a long conversation about what healthy neighbourhoods need. Individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds are involved. In February, they had more than 300 people at a brainstorming session and hundreds have answered online and mail-out surveys.

Several public schools have recently closed and two more Catholic ones will follow soon in the Greater Hardisty neighbourhoods of Capilano, Forest Heights, Terrace Heights, Gold Bar and Fulton Place. At least one would be a good candidate for a seniors home/daycare, Brenneis said. Other strip malls are ripe for redevelopment, too, perhaps with seniors housing on top.

The group is compiling information now to report back this fall to support staff at the city, who selected Greater Hardisty as a pilot project to understand how to work with communities around the issue of school closures. Once they know what the community needs, they’ll look to partner with developers. If Greater Hardisty can be successful, it could pave the way for other neighbourhood groups to get support from the city.

Building projects to serve needs in the community can be tricky, but certainly worthwhile, said Raymond Swonek, chief executive at the Greater Edmonton Foundation. Other jurisdictions even combine schools with seniors housing and commercial spaces such as coffee shops and corner stores. But from their experience at Ottewell, Swonek learned it’s important to get all the players together at the planning stages.

In its case, Primrose Place has been using various spaces in the neighbourhood for 40 years. It approached the Greater Edmonton Foundation and together built a wing specifically for the daycare. The seniors lodge supplies their food, does the dishes and takes care of maintenance.

Seniors started moving into their new wing last month. Once everyone is settled, staff are looking to organize joint reading or singing times to allow the seniors and children to interact more formally, site manager Susan Scott said.

“The potential is certainly there.”
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