

A new world vision of senior co-housing



By Sooke News Mirror

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Due to the vision of some local residence and their determined persistence, Sooke may well be home to the first fully operational co-housing program in Canada that requires a university course to raise an awareness of the co-housing community. According to one of the driving forces behind the realization of this idea, co-founder Margaret Critchlow, "It's the first co-housing program in the world associated with a university to help distribute the message."

On March 9 and 10, the Royal Roads course "Aging Well in Community: Senior Co-housing" will be held here in Sooke, one time only. The course will be held at 6669 Horne Road, Sooke, currently home to Sushi ON The Sea.

This address is currently being considered for the new senior co-housing project, currently establishing itself in Sooke. The course is required for anyone interested in investing in this project.

Co-housing for seniors involves a new way of thinking, says Critchlow. Presently, the model is that people live independently in their own homes, and once they age and become unable to care for themselves, they move (or get moved) into seniors' housing. The concept of co-housing for seniors will help reshape that vision.

"We are an intentional neighbourhood," says Critchlow, and adds that the model of co-caring for each other builds a community of "neighbourly, mutual support" that helps people stay out of assisted living."

An information package defines the model of co-care as "a grass-roots model of neighbourly mutual support that can help reduce social isolation and promote positive, active aging. It encourages independence through the awareness that we are all interdependent."

Critchlow elaborates: "Community is really important, and one of the things that has come to us through the study group is the importance of social connection. Studies are showing that it's social isolation that is the real killer. It has a greater mortality risk than smoking."

Living in a co-housing neighbourhood requires, to some degree, a group approach. Residents will continue to have their own fully functional units, complete with kitchens, livingrooms, bath and bedrooms, and they will have the added advantage of being able to access 3,900 square-foot shared building for their family gatherings, guests, or just quiet moments to themselves.

The Sooke co-housing group is aiming to have somewhere between 24 to 30 units, housing 40 to 50 people. They will work site planning, city zoning and the architect before these plans can be finalized. The assumption is that each unit will house singles or couples, and the units will be freeholds, meaning that they are fully owned. The average unit will be about 900 square feet based on input from the current group, with the possibility of some units going up to 1,200 square feet. Again, all of this is still to be finalized.

The original structure, currently home to Ralph Hull, will become the shared facility. In addition, the existing building offers a multi-room downstairs that includes a complete 675 square foot suite. This suite is currently intended to house an onsite

caregiver, who may possibly be a health care worker.

Moving away from living completely autonomous in your own home, often alone, but completely in control of everything, and moving towards co-housing, requires a mind shift.

"You have to be willing to exchange structure for the benefits of more interaction with like-minded people. Now we are not a commune, I can't emphasize that enough. It's very clear what we own and what is private, and privacy is really important to our members," says Critchlow.

The benefit of co-housing in a society with a looming silver tsunami (also known as the aging tsunami) become very apparent when you look at the numbers.

According to The Public Library of Science Medicine Editors (2010), "[s]tronger social relationships are associated with a 50 % increased chance of survival, on average, over the course of 148 studies."

An article in the The Globe & Mail (12 July 2011) makes the claim that "[k]eeping an elderly patient in the community and out of a long-term home saves the system \$50,000 a year.

If social relationships increase our ability to live longer on our own, and it saves the system an annual amount of \$50,000 per person, living within a community makes more and more sense.

A key component of this co-housing project in Sooke is to promote, "Active aging with dignity and autonomy, within a community," says Critchlow. And she plans to do it in style, for where else will you be able to have access to a 3,900 square foot shared living space, and enjoy a million-dollar waterfront view that would be individually unaffordable to most?

When asked if this project looks like it's going to happen, Critchlow response, "It feels great. It feels solid."

The project already has eight equity members and eight associate members, and the project is a registered company. They have a project manager, Ronaye Matthew, who is experienced in co-housing projects, and an architect, Peter Treuheit who has previously built co-housing units.

Equity members have invested in the project, and associate members have paid a membership fee that allows them to stay current with the project as it develops. Associate members can become equity members by investing capital in the project. All Equity members are required to take this course.

If you are interested in the concept of co-housing, whether it is through this project or one of your own creation, consider attending this course. The class setting helps with getting out of denial about aging, as it removes the isolation factor and normalizes the personal concerns that one might be dealing with, or not dealing with, says Critchlow.

This course will be held in Sooke on March 9 and 10. This course will be offered a second time at Royal Roads University, on May 25-26.

You can read more about the co-housing project in Sooke on their website: <http://www.harbourside.ca/>

To register for the course, go to <http://cstudies.royalroads.ca/>. The course number is PEHL3072. At the time of writing this article, there were eight spots still available for the course here in Sooke.

Margaret Critchlow was a professor of social anthropology at York university in Toronto for 25 years. She is one of the founding members of this co-housing project and lives in Sooke.

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