

Leaky-condo activist steps down

By WILLIAM BOEI

Nona Saunders, B.C.'s senior lobbyist for condominium owners for the past seven years, knows her leaky condos.

Saunders, who is retiring as president of the Condominium Home Owners' Association, bought her first leaky condo in 1981, and the strata complex she lives in now is facing its second round of major repairs.

That first condo was a penthouse suite in Vancouver's West End, and today Saunders would recognize it instantly as bad news.

Its exposed outside walls had no overhangs. Its decks came with permanent puddles. The enclosed flower beds had no place to drain except into the walls.

"It leaked like a sieve," Saunders recalled more than 20 years later. "The decks leaked, the windows leaked, the walls leaked. And there was mould on the walls."

There was a developer's warranty on the building, but it was a dud. The developer had used a shell company to build the project and abandoned the company when the building was sold. There was no one to sue.

By the time she sold the place, she had lost \$60,000 and considered herself lucky. At least seven other owners who couldn't afford to pay for repairs walked away from their suites with nothing.

Still, it took Saunders, a career flight attendant, seven years to save up for another down payment.

In 1994, she bought into a multi-building complex in Coquitlam and this time — she thought —

she did her homework.

She found it assuring that the complex was a Georgie Award winner, built by a big-name developer who had been a director of the Canadian Home Builders Association and of the New Home Warranty program.

It was featured in splashy ads in the New Homes section of the weekend *Sun*. Saunders recalls viewing the place and being impressed by its "gorgeous" design, its attractive landscaping, the ponds and fountains in the courtyard.

But trouble began almost immediately after she moved in. Strata council minutes hinted at leaks in one of the complex's buildings, and evidence of poor construction practices began to surface.

She got active and joined the council, just in time to find out the building was suffering from what is now known as premature building envelope failure. Rainwater got into the walls and couldn't get out.

Today, that building is in the final stages of its second round of repairs. But now another part of the eight-building complex, its only high-rise tower, is in trouble.

"The reports indicate that again, it's a matter of poor workmanship, inattention to the details that allow water ingress," Saunders said.

"And yes, I will personally have

down after four years as CHOA president, the association presented her with a newly created award "for her years of outstanding service and tireless efforts on behalf of consumers in B.C.," said executive director Tony Giovenutu.

The 40,000-member association plans to make it an annual award recognizing individuals in government, industry or advocacy groups for work on behalf of consumers.

"She was my teacher," said Carmen Maretic, a real estate agent who stopped selling condos and founded the CASH society (Compensation and Accountability to Soaked Homeowners) to lobby for government compensation for leaky-condo repairs.

Maretic said Saunders was a major force in the development of the current home warranty program, which provides two-year warranties on workmanship and labour, five years on water penetration and 10 years on major structural work.

In 1997, when Saunders served on *The Vancouver Sun's* community editorial board, she wrote a column setting out a series of objectives, including the creation of a recognized homeowners' lobby group, improved residential building standards, better home-buyer protection, updated condominium legislation, compensation for leaky-condo repairs, and a new warranty plan.

Looking back, she says she's pleased with progress toward most of those goals, especially the warranty program, which



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Nona Saunders testifies at Barrett Commission, which she helped get established. She attended 90 of its 97 days of hearings.

now is "the strongest in the country, if not North America."

"The main thing that's unresolved is compensation that would make a difference on the impact that this is having on people's lives," she added.

Asked if she is confident that homes being built now under the new warranties are of better quality, Saunders said, "I don't think we'll know until the homes that are built under the new legislative standards reach their milestones."

"So it could be as long as five to 10 years before we'll know with any certainty that it made a difference."

As to her retirement, while she's stepping down as CHOA president, "This is not going to be cold turkey; it couldn't be."

She'll likely continue to sit on committees, particularly one that's pushing for government licensing of strata property managers. And she's not about to stop

lobbying for compensation. Groups like CASH are making headway, Saunders said, but the B.C. government still hasn't fully realized that the leaky-condo crisis is killing the goose that laid the golden egg — a residential construction industry that contributed \$7.2 billion to the B.C. economy in 1994 but had plummeted to around \$2 billion by 2000.

Even today, with fresh talk of hot real estate markets and new building booms, residential building permits are being taken out at only a third of the pace of eight years ago, she said.

And as long as there's no effective public policy to provide the means of repairing 15 years' worth of damaged housing stock, and no recognition of how that lack has decimated B.C. consumers' disposable income, "that will continue to be a drag on the entire province's economy."

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