

Burnaby NEWSLEADER



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A neighbourhood on the rise

HighGate is fast becoming the hub it was designed to be

By Jennifer McFee NEWS LEADER

Bill Yamaura watched through the window as his wife, Keiko, cleaned the canopy over the front door of their Burnaby home.

He went outside to help her and propped a ladder against the house. As he stepped up, he slipped. He tumbled backwards, hit his head on a concrete block and blacked out.

When he awoke, he said he was fine. But two days later, the retired Burnaby resident told his wife to call an ambulance. He was rushed to Burnaby Hospital, where they discovered two broken bones in his head.

After being bed-ridden at the hospital for nearly a month, Bill returned to his home on Canada Way. But things weren't the same. He could no longer help out with household tasks. All he could do was watch as his wife struggled to keep up with mounting yard and garden chores.

The solution was simple - the Yamauras decided to sell their three-bedroom home of 43 years and move to a new highrise tower at HighGate Village.

Safe at home

In December, 84 year-old Bill and his wife moved into a condo in the 31-storey Emerson building, one of four new towering developments surrounding HighGate Mall. They nabbed the last one in the tower, a two-bedroom, two bathroom suite.

"I really, really like it here. Security is the most important thing," said Keiko, adding that she feels safer in the condo than she did in their house.

"We don't get that fear feeling," Bill added, saying the area is brightly lit with safe parking and security cameras. "I think on this property here, the community is very nice. If you go across the road, it's nice there too. You see a lot of different nationalities. It's peaceful here."

The active couple enjoys living in the upbeat area within walking distance to HighGate Mall's grocery store, bank, drug store and shops. They leave their car parked for days at a time, and like many other HighGate residents, they often stroll to the local hub of restaurants and shops.

But the bustling Burnaby centre was not always that way. Less than five years ago, the scene was quite different, even down to its name.



MARIO BARTEL/NEWSLEADER

Nathan Hewitt says he's noticed a lot of changes in Burnaby's Highgate neighbourhood in the eight years he's owned the Me 'n Ed's pizza restaurant as new residents move into the gleaming new concrete condominium towers across the street.

A mall in decline

Where the towers now stand, Middlegate Mall sat for decades as the area's only shopping mecca. In late 2004, the deteriorating low-rise mall was torn down and four high-rise buildings grew up from the ground, providing 860 new homes to the neighbourhood. Taking the place of the former mall's sprawling parking lot stands HighGate Village Plaza, with over 117,000 square feet of retail space.

"It basically used to be a sea of asphalt," said Daryl Simpson, vice-president of sales and marketing for Bosa Properties, the developer with the vision to revamp the area.

"There was nothing there. There was an old mall that was in need of upkeep and had been ignored for a number of decades. Middlegate in the mid-'90s was not a desirable place." The developers used an "urban village" concept to create a regional town centre for Edmonds. The goal of the plan was to meet recreational, retail and residential needs in one place, which would bring a mix of ages, races and demographic profiles to the area.

"It gets people out of their cars. When we see people in an area, we as humans tend to gravitate towards it. So many people walk around here now," said Simpson, adding that the Bosa family grew up in Buckingham Heights and used to ride their bikes to Middlegate to get ice cream and groceries.

Local restaurant owner Melody Hewitt said

her nearby business became much busier after HighGate was built, and the new mall brought an instant improvement to Middlegate. Although she owns the Hall Street location of Me-n-Eds Pizza with her husband, Nathan, Hewitt started working at the restaurant 18 years ago as a delivery driver. In that time, she has seen the area undergo immense transformation.

"I used to have to ask the ladies of the night to move along when I came in each morning. There's a lot more younger families that come in now, lots of children."

Melody Hewitt

"A lot of the area's been cleaned up. The clientele has improved a lot," said Hewitt, who met her husband when they were both employees at the restaurant they now own.

"I used to have to ask the ladies of the night to move along when I came in each morning. There's a lot more younger families that come in now, lots of children."

The central location of the community police department brings a welcome change to the area, she added.

Staff Sgt. John Buis is another fan of the

new location of the local police office.

"We're close to where a lot of people come every day. You could in theory live in the same building you work in," he said. "There's a lot of similarities between Whalley and the way Edmonds used to be. When it was Middlegate, it was lower income. There's a lot of assisted living in the area. You've got a more diverse community now. Diversity was part of the city's plan."

The plan for the future is to bring more development to the city centre, including housing towers, a swimming pool and a new library.

Paul Cipywnyk, president of the Edmonds Town Centre Business and Community Association, agrees that HighGate Village is a much better use of the site, which has brought more of a community focus to the hub.

"You get people hanging out in the square, drinking coffee and eating ice cream. You see kids playing. The overall atmosphere is more upscale than it used to be," he said.

"There were problems with drugs and prostitution that are difficult to eradicate completely, but the whole Edmonds area is turning around. I think the changes are ongoing. They're moving in the right direction."



Happy at HighGate

Bill and Keiko open the heavy condo door to walk their shih tzu, Chibisan, which means "small one" in Japanese. At the elevators, they exchange greetings with their neighbours, who are headed to the grocery store, reusable grocery bags in hand.

As the elevator doors open, Bill turns to his wife and smiles. "I'm so glad we got rid of that house," he said.

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