

## Grow-ops: It's time for a one-stop B.C. registry

BY OWEN DICKIE, SPECIAL TO THE SUN JANUARY 26, 2010

As British Columbia approaches the one-year anniversary of its licensing of home inspectors, it's a good idea to address one significant area of home inspection that can fall between the cracks of the province's newly regulated home inspection industry: grow-ops.

Minister of Public Safety and Solicitor-General Kash Heed, in a letter to the editor in the Jan. 15 edition of *The Vancouver Sun* about a consumer who had unknowingly purchased a house that had been used as a grow-op, said, "The changes we made have helped to make sure inspectors are qualified, but buyers still have a responsibility to do their homework to make sure the homes they are interested in are a good investment ... a home inspection is designed to alert them of potential issues, but is not a guarantee."

Home inspectors are used when consumers are considering buying a home and want to make an informed decision.

The home inspection itself is a comprehensive visual examination of the home's overall structure, major systems, components and property conditions. The idea is to minimize the risk because no one wants to face serious unexpected costs.

Probably the most devastating unexpected cost after a purchase would arise from a discovery that the house was once a grow-op or drug lab. The consequences of such a discovery -- massive remediation and its attendant financial, emotional and health devastation -- would be every homebuyer's nightmare.

And yet, with an increasing percentage of B.C. real estate properties having been used as grow-ops, prospective purchasers face some real threats.

With no publicly accessible, one-stop provincewide registry of identified grow-ops, the message to those who choose to disguise a home's grow-op history is that if you can fool a visual inspection, you're in the clear. Consumers deserve more than that. It's time we made better use of our front line of defence provided by "first responders" -- the police who find the grow-ops.

But that's only part of it. Police admit many grow-ops are never found.

Often after one crop, these houses are dumped back on the market. If the grow-op seller avoids detection by neighbours and police, is handy with paintbrush and hammer to disguise the damage and dishonest in filling out the disclosure statement, the last line of defence is the visual inspection.

If the potential buyer engages a home inspector to perform that visual inspection, that inspector cannot damage the home. The idea of a home inspection with carpets torn up and holes punched in walls is a myth.

So what can be done to protect consumers? We need to take advantage of that all-important information available at the front line in the fight against drugs: which houses are involved. Canadian Association of Home and Property Inspectors (BC) has proposed to a range of agencies and organizations the development of a one-stop provincewide registry of identified grow-ops and drug labs to ensure awareness of their existence and remediation of them before they can re-enter the "fit-for-habitation" market.

If a building has been revealed as a grow-op, consumers should have access to that information and whether or not remediation has occurred.

At the same time, CAHPI(BC)'s grow-op-recognition training in our education sessions with all CAHPI (BC) home inspectors is constantly evolving.

Five years ago, we launched an initiative that saw us travel throughout the province delivering presentations on how to recognize the signs of a grow-op.

Building on that effort, we are assessing our examination process and our standards of practice as they relate to the grow-op issue. The more individuals able to identify and required to report a property as a grow-op -- from police, to trades, to all involved in real estate transactions -- the less risk to the consumer.

Reducing risk is why consumers should know the warning signs a house may have been a grow-op. These include:

- Holes or patches in the ceiling in odd places or a drywall patch close to electrical services.
- Painted-over staple marks, or evidence of plastics stapled.
- Disconnected toilet or furnace air and exhaust ducts.
- Extraneous ductwork or a pile of unused duct pipe.
- Caulking or sealant on interior floors, walls, or ceilings.

These indicators do not mean a house must have been used as a grow-op, but they do mean you need to ask questions. The better informed we all are, the less risk to all of us.

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