

'Green' developers vow to press on

Risks include condo owner disputes, reluctant insurers, higher upkeep

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Word that B.C.'s insurance industry is unwilling to insure green roofs on condominiums hasn't cooled enthusiasm for using the innovative technology in several Victoria projects.

Travis Lee, developer of the \$40-million Gateway Green office building, said he's not concerned about the news.

"Green roofs are the right thing to do," Lee said.

"The more we read about climate change, it's apparent that green buildings are the way to go."

Green roofs are made up of plants grown in light soil over waterproof membranes and vapour barriers. They absorb rain and keep buildings warmer in winter and cooler in summer, saving energy costs.

Lee said he can appreciate that condominium builders might shy away from the technology out of fear "you could have 100 owners arguing about how to manage a green roof."

That's not a concern to Lee, because his company will continue to own and manage the commercial building at the

corner of Blanshard and Fisgard streets. In five to eight years, he expects heating and ventilation savings will make up for the additional costs of the green roof.

"But this is my first green roof. Ask me in a couple of years."

Tony James, architect for Municipal House in James Bay, predicts insurance companies will eventually have to come around to the benefits of the technology.

James said Municipal House, the new Victoria headquarters for the Union of British Columbia Municipalities, will have a green roof and a green wall — a wall covered in plants that clean the air. "Insurance or not — that's not an issue as far as this project is concerned."

Most Victoria green-roof projects involve commercial or institutional buildings, while the caution from the Homeowner Protection Office focused on insuring multi-unit residential buildings.

The recent letter from the HPO to municipalities expressed concern strata councils may not have the skills to maintain green roofs.

Maintenance would be less of a problem for commercial, institutional or res-

idential rental buildings, since single owners are more able to control standards.

The letter prompted the city of Vancouver to lift its requirement that the 2010 Olympic village include green roofs.

Meanwhile, the Capital Regional District has applied for grants to install a green roof on the second phase of its Fisgard Street headquarters.

Simon Joslin said the issue raised by the HPO will be sent to a risk manager for evaluation, but he doesn't expect the time-tested green-roof technology will be singled out as problematic. The CRD's insurance provider appears willing to provide coverage, he said.

Jody Watson, harbours and watershed coordinator for the CRD, said green roofs are projected to add up to 20 years of roof longevity. But the biggest benefit is that the roof captures and retains water as it falls, as opposed to draining it into the storm-water system.

"We send large amounts of rainwater into creeks and the harbour. That can affect fish habitat as it picks up contaminants from streets."

Victoria's first green roof was installed

on the University of Victoria's new engineering building.

Gerald Robson, UVic's executive director of facilities management, said landscaping required by a green roof is expected to add to maintenance costs. Still, the university is committed to installing more such roofs, and he expects extended warranties will address any problems.

"With the kind of contractors we are dealing with ... they will almost certainly be in business five years from now."

Roofing inspector Bob Tuff said he wouldn't recommend green roofs on wood structures, but "that doesn't mean they aren't done and aren't done successfully." The issue is the structure's ability to handle additional weight from the soil and other components.

"A concrete building is ideal for a green roof I don't understand why [insurance companies] decided not to insure them. But I guess they like to collect money only, not hand it out."

Tuff said that in leaky condos, the roofs were the best part of the buildings. "It was the windows and walls that were failing."



Travis Lee: 'Green roofs are the right thing to do.' *Times Colonist*