

By Wayne Jensen

Families at risk, homelessness prevention, substance use, mental health challenges. These are issues I never imagined a children's charity would face on a daily basis. But they are the modern challenges of our growing, dynamic community.

The Boys & Girls Club of Greater Victoria routinely offers quality out-of-school care, summer camps and youth outreach programming, but we are increasingly being called upon to deal with society's toughest problems.

Through that lens – the need to help more people with complex needs – the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Victoria Foundation made the considered decision to divide our large property in Metchosin and sell off a 40-acre parcel. The future sale, which is a long way from being realized, will help fund these critical needs. But never did we imagine it would spark such local community reaction, with some of our long-time neighbours crying foul.

In recent weeks, we have worked hard to set the record straight, but I am troubled by the misinformation I continue to hear in the community regarding our motives. I can clear things up: We are motivated to help today's children, youth and families. Period.

We are not real estate developers constructing a subdivision and, although laudable, it isn't our mandate to retain property for conservation purposes. Our core mission is to provide safe, supportive places for young people and their families to experience new opportunities, build positive relationships and develop skills for life.

For 60 years in Greater Victoria, we have been community builders, offering life-changing experiences to thousands of children and youth.

Our association with Metchosin began more than 35 years ago when our non-profit agency began offering youth justice programs on the 98-acre property on Metchosin Road. For many years, countless young offenders annually experienced wilderness programming on the site, building life skills, managing anger and learning to work in teams.

In 2004, we purchased the property from the provincial government at fair market value with the intention of operating these important programs long into the future. But when Canada changed its young offender laws, those programs were effectively eliminated. It was the beginning of an evolution in youth needs in Greater Victoria that has reshaped our program needs for this property.

We have always strived to be good neighbours and serve our community well, welcoming school groups, environmental clubs and First Responder trainers to experience the property. But as a board, we are concerned that annual maintenance costs, insurance, safety enhancements and professional services divert resources from our core responsibility to deliver critical supports to children and youth.

Look around our region and it's easy to see new demand pressures, particularly in growing communities such as Langford, Colwood, Central Saanich and Sooke. Critical services, including youth mental health support related to COVID-19, need to be available close to home. Through the sale of the 40-acre parcel, we can provide more services to more young people.

While some have called us secretive about our intentions with the Metchosin property, the truth is we began this open process more than a year ago in discussions with the municipality. We formally applied to the District of Metchosin to begin their process in early 2020 and we discussed our intent openly with the mayor and council in September.

We understand some people in Metchosin want this property protected as a natural space and we have heard of indirect interest in a land conservation agency, community group or municipal/regional government potentially purchasing the property for preservation. Our transparent process means any one of these preservation initiatives will have fair and equal purchasing opportunity.

As I write this, the 40-acre parcel has not yet been divided, has not been listed for sale and we have not engaged any offers from prospective purchasers. It is our intention to continue operating programming this spring and summer on our existing land, which is largely protected in the Agricultural Land Reserve.

Not everyone will agree with our decision, but we hope residents of southern Vancouver Island will look at our long track record of serving the community and see that we are, as always, placing the needs of the region's young people first. Never have their needs been greater.

*Wayne Jensen is a community volunteer and treasurer of the Boys & Girls Club of Greater Victoria Foundation.*