

Sleight of Hand

I've lived for over fifty years two blocks west of the Mill Creek ravine, north of the Ritchie neighbourhood, which has been the home of the Gainers Meat Packing Plant for almost one hundred years.

Linda Duncan, my NDP member of parliament for a dozen years (who lives two blocks north of me) and I went to the Ritchie Community League for a meeting with Peter Pocklington and his architect, Bertie Richards, to learn of his plans to redevelop the Gainers site on the edge of Mill Creek ravine.

I'd gotten to know Linda Duncan, as we both had worked together to oppose developers who wanted to ruin our historic neighbourhood with walk-up apartments.

The president of the community league, a guy in a shiny hockey jacket, started the meeting by announcing that they had raised seven hundred dollars in a raffle for a quilt and that Mr. Pocklington had agreed to match that seven hundred dollars. He bought that meeting for seven hundred bucks!

The plans he presented included development down into the ravine, violating the "top of the bank" rule and the site proposed would be four times the density allowed by the present zoning.

Ritchie was definitely a company town, populated by workers who lived in tiny shack-like houses with no basements. These workers were mostly Eastern European immigrants who worked the killing floor, trudging through blood and dung for long hours and low wages.

The workers were mainly concerned for their jobs at the packing plant and Pocklington told them, "I have to make enough money from this development to build a new packing plant for your jobs."

Linda Duncan and I pointed out that the present plant was antiquated and useless and that the residents should not have to give up their neighbourhood to provide Pocklington with a new plant. We were the only people there who shared this view.

The neighbourhood was saved by a recession that bankrupted Pocklington, the Gainers plant and much of his fortune, because the city had loaned money for a revitalization of this old plant.

Pocklington, now bankrupt, sold the Oilers hockey team to Darryl Katz and sold the star player, Wayne Gretzky to the Los Angeles Kings, making him reviled as the worst corporate citizen in Western Canada.

Now with the removal of the decrepit Gainers plant and an attractive housing development, the neighbourhood has become gentrified with "nesting couples" and two new vibrant community schools.