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OAK BAY NEWS

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UPFRONT



Got \$1.95 million? You can pick up this oceanfront property at 2985 Beach Drive, where a controversial mansion was going to be built. It seems the dispute over the building of the 8,400-square foot house has given current owner Peter Gustavson a change of heart. The site is now on the market.

Nominate now for courage

Nominations are open for the Courage to Come Back Award. The third annual, provincewide award (presented by the Coast Foundation Society) is given to individuals who have shown inspirational courage in one of six categories: mental health, physical rehabilitation, general medicine, chemical dependency, economic adversity and youth. Nominations are open to any resident of B.C. Forms can be picked up from any Scotiabank, printed from the WCB Web site at www.worksafebc.com or obtained by calling (604) 872-3502. Deadline is Feb. 19. Movie Monday founder Bruce Saunders (pictured at right) was nominated for last year's award.

Farm Aid?

Anyone in Oak Bay can be a farmer and thus receive a massive tax break on their property. The Blacks (see story at right) are arguing that their Beach Drive home legally qualifies as farmland because they sold \$2,500 worth of plants grown there last year. Those Oak Bayers living on, well, normal-sized lots need only sell \$10,000 worth of homegrown produce to become a farm. It gets better. Grow marijuana hydroponically in your basement and then (before you get busted) kill the crop, claim you would have sold \$10,000 worth and apply for agricultural subsidies from the federal and provincial government because your crops failed. You win hundreds of thousands of dollars and maybe Willie Nelson will show up on your front lawn and stage a Farm Aid benefit concert.

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Young gunmen rob and beat man walking his dog. See page 4.

Uplands "farm" tries for a big tax break

By Thomas Winterhoff
News staff reporter

When it came to light last week that an exclusive — and very expensive — piece of residential property in Oak Bay had been reclassified by the British Columbia Assessment Authority as farmland, the situation not only stirred up intense interest at the municipal level but also drew media attention from across the country.

Annabeth Black, of 3175 Beach Drive, successfully applied last year to have her property reclassified as Class 9 agricultural land, due to the fact that she raises native plants (such as Garry oaks) and older varieties of flowers for sale. The move effectively reduced the assessed value of the property — including the house on the land — from \$3,270,000 to \$1,028,900, because the assessment authority now values the beachfront land at only \$7,000.

That change, as it stands now, could potentially save Black and her husband (David Black, owner of Black Press and the *Oak Bay News*) as much as \$24,000 on this year's tax bill. Depending on who you talk to, that either represents a legitimate use of the assessment legislation as it's now written or an end run around local zoning and bylaw regulations.

Oak Bay Mayor Christopher Causton was one of the people who were surprised that the application went through, especially since there is no existing farm zoning in Oak Bay and because commercial horticultural activity is expressly prohibited in the municipal bylaw.

"When I actually saw what the assessment was, I was very taken aback — because it had dropped so low," he said.

Although he acknowledged that anyone is entitled to make such an application, Causton indicated that he did not think that

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DAVID LENNAM/OAK BAY NEWS

Reel Madness Film Festival organizer Bruce Saunders with a poster for his Jan. 18-22 event, which will be held at the Eric Martin Pavilion theatre.

MAD MOVIES

By David Lennam
News editor

Bruce Saunders has opened up about his personal battle with mental illness. Now he's hoping others will do the same, once they see what Reel Madness is all about. Saunders' third annual Reel Madness film festival will screen seven feature films and an assortment of shorts over five days, beginning Jan. 18. All of the films explore some facet of mental illness and the difficult recovery process, with an emphasis this year on stories about families undone by mental illnesses.

All of the films were made by independent filmmakers, many of whom are sharing their own experiences of living in a family where someone they love suffers from a mental illness — be it Alzheimer's, schizophrenia or depression. Audiences not only get to watch new movies they may otherwise never get a chance to see on the big screen, they will be privy to intimate chats with the film's director after each show.

"The whole idea of it is to meet with the filmmakers and people with the illnesses — or people who work with people with the illnesses," says Saunders. "It's a real chance to chew the story over."

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