

Fantasy Garden site goes up for sale

Rundown former theme park was once a symbol of B.C.'s oddball politics

Larry Pynn

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RICHMOND - Fantasy Garden World, the tattered theme park that sank a premier and once served as a symbol for the zany world of B.C. politics, is for sale.

But there is no asking price and no for-sale sign on the property at No. 5 Road and Steveston Highway.

"It's too big a deal for for-sale signs," said Bill Vander Zalm, the ex-Social Credit premier who resigned over his sale of Fantasy Garden World to Taiwan billionaire Tan Yu's Asiaworld (Canada) Development Corp. "You and I can do that in front of our house. But they don't do that for a place like that."

Among the list of potential buyers is Rick Ilich, owner of Townline Homes Inc., a Richmond development company.

"It's a very prominent site," Ilich said in an interview Monday. "It certainly is a gateway to Richmond, so you'd think the city would want something that would showcase the city. They want to get it right."

Ilich said the family of the late Tan Yu is selling the property through broker Martin Dohm of Coal Harbour Realty Advisors Inc. There is no asking price and no deadline for offers. Dohm could not be reached Monday.

"It's been listed for a short while," Ilich said. "There's been a handful of guys looking at it."

Vander Zalm paid \$1.7 million in 1984 for the 8.5-hectare property and sold it for \$16 million in 1991. The property has a 2007 assessed value of \$20.2 million.



CREDIT: Ian Smith, Vancouver Sun
 Decaying, crumbling Fantasy Garden World will soon be sold. The original developer, former premier Bill Vander Zalm, says the owners were never serious about preserving the site.

Ilich said about four hectares of the site are excluded from the agricultural land reserve and ripe for development.

"There is an opportunity for some mixed residential-commercial use," he said. "The city is aware of it and is interested in seeing the corner get cleaned up, but there's been no set plan until someone gets it under contract."

Richmond Mayor Malcolm Brodie could not be reached to comment on Monday.

Vander Zalm resigned as premier in 1991 after four and a half years in office when a provincial conflict-of-interest report found he had mixed private business with his public office in the sale of the gardens.

He was charged with criminal breach of trust but found not guilty in B.C. Supreme Court in 1992. The court ruled that while Vander Zalm had put himself in a conflict of interest, he was not a criminal.

Interviewed at his South Delta home, Vander Zalm said he is saddened to see how Fantasy Garden World, long closed as an operating theme park, has fallen into disrepair.

"We don't go there often because we get very discouraged and depressed when we see the way it is," he said.

"The Taiwanese that bought the gardens were not very good gardeners. They obviously, and we didn't know it, had no interest in the gardens. They were, instead, hoping to one day see a casino.

"They kind of ran the place down a bit. It's not what it was."

lpynn@png.canwest.com

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