

CALGARY

SUMMER/05

CityProbe

ADDRESSING CONCERNS IN OUR COMMUNITIES

CRYSTAL METH

A RECIPE FOR DISASTER

F.A.S.D.

WHAT WOMEN
NEED TO KNOW

MARIHUANA GROW OPS!

CALGARY'S COALITION
READY FOR BATTLE

AS INMATES SEE IT

WOMEN BEHIND BARS

PLUS...

ONCE UPON A CRIME

BRUTAL MURDER IN A
FRONTIER TOWN

"CHALLENGE
DAYS"



STOP MGOS

Calgary Coalition

By: Gwen Tennant

The statistics are staggering. What was once believed to be a problem concentrated on the west coast of B.C. is now expanding across the country at an alarming rate. Illegal marihuana grow operations (MGOs) are increasing in numbers at unprecedented rates and Calgary has become a stronghold for this criminal activity. Illegal MGOS have infiltrated residential neighborhoods and can be found in almost every community in the city. These are not just Ma & Pa operations; they are neighborhood drug factories operated by organized crime. The impacts and losses are far-reaching - from endangered children, to power theft, insurance and mortgage fraud, artificially inflated residential property values, environmental contamination, health and safety hazards that first and second responders and the public are exposed to on a daily basis. Marihuana cultivation and trade is a massive, multi-million dollar business in Calgary that fuels other illicit drug trade including crack cocaine, heroin, methamphetamine labs and the associated crime and violence in our community.

Police pressure and legislative changes in the Lower Mainland of B.C. have pushed the problem to Calgary, where we have ominously earned the reputation of having the best "bud" in the country. The high-concentration of THC in marihuana grown in Calgary fetches about \$2,000 a pound here, while it can sell for \$8,000 to \$10,000 per pound in the larger American cities.

"Calgarians have told us in our most recent citizen survey that drug law enforcement is one of their top 5 policing concerns," said S/Sgt. Kevan Stuart, who heads the Calgary Police Service Drug Unit. "We know that the neighborhood marihuana grow op problem is bigger than any single agency can solve on its own, and it's one that has become a significant public health and safety issue for our citizens as well," added Stuart.

S/Sgt. Stuart says that Calgary has seen a significant increase in the number of successful seizures over the past two years as a result of a strategic partnership formed in 2003 between the RCMP and Calgary Police Service Drug Units and the Criminal

Calgary has become a stronghold for this criminal activity.

Back Row, Left to Right ...
Detective Nina Vaughan, CPS Drug Unit; Adele Zanutig, Project Director; Don Dickson, President, Calgary Real Estate Board; Patrick Lichowit, Project Manager; Gerry Baxter, Executive Director, Calgary Apartment Association

Front Row, Left to Right
S/Sgt. Kevan Stuart, CPS Drug Unit; Terry Hathaway, Executive Director, Calgary Crime Stoppers; Alderman Diane Colley-Urquhart, Chair, STOP MGOS! Calgary Coalition; Don Wilson, Coordinator, Calgary Fire Department Hazardous Materials; Bruno Ratzlaff, City of Calgary Safety Codes Officer; Cathy Cornfield, Community Representative & Advocate; Marc Halat, City of Calgary Chief License Inspector.



Alderman Diane Colley-Urquhart,
Chair, STOP MGOs! Calgary Coalition

SUCCESS LIES IN IMPLEMENTING A NEW INTEGRATED APPROACH

Intelligence Service of Alberta, known as the Southern Alberta Marihuana Investigative Team (SAMIT). In 2001, the value of marihuana plants seized by police amounted to \$9 million; in 2002, \$19 million; in 2003, \$53 million; and in 2004, \$101 million. "That's an increase of 532% in 3 years and that's only with police being able to act on about 40% of the over 900 CrimeStopper tips we received in 2004," said S/Sgt. Stuart. "We expect this number to unfortunately increase dramatically this year," he added.

Already in 2005, CrimeStoppers, another member of the Coalition, has received over 600 tips. "We don't want the residents of this city to feel compromised in anyway when it comes to reporting suspected grow op houses - that's why we are here 24/7," states Grant Hardman, President of Calgary CrimeStoppers. "We provide citizens with a vehicle to anonymously provide the police with information about crimes or potential crimes in the community. The increase in the number of tips we've received so far this year speak for themselves," added Hardman. Last year at this time, 450 tips had been received related to suspected grow ops.

What is being done to address this growing problem? City Probe contacted Alderman Diane Colley-Urquhart who

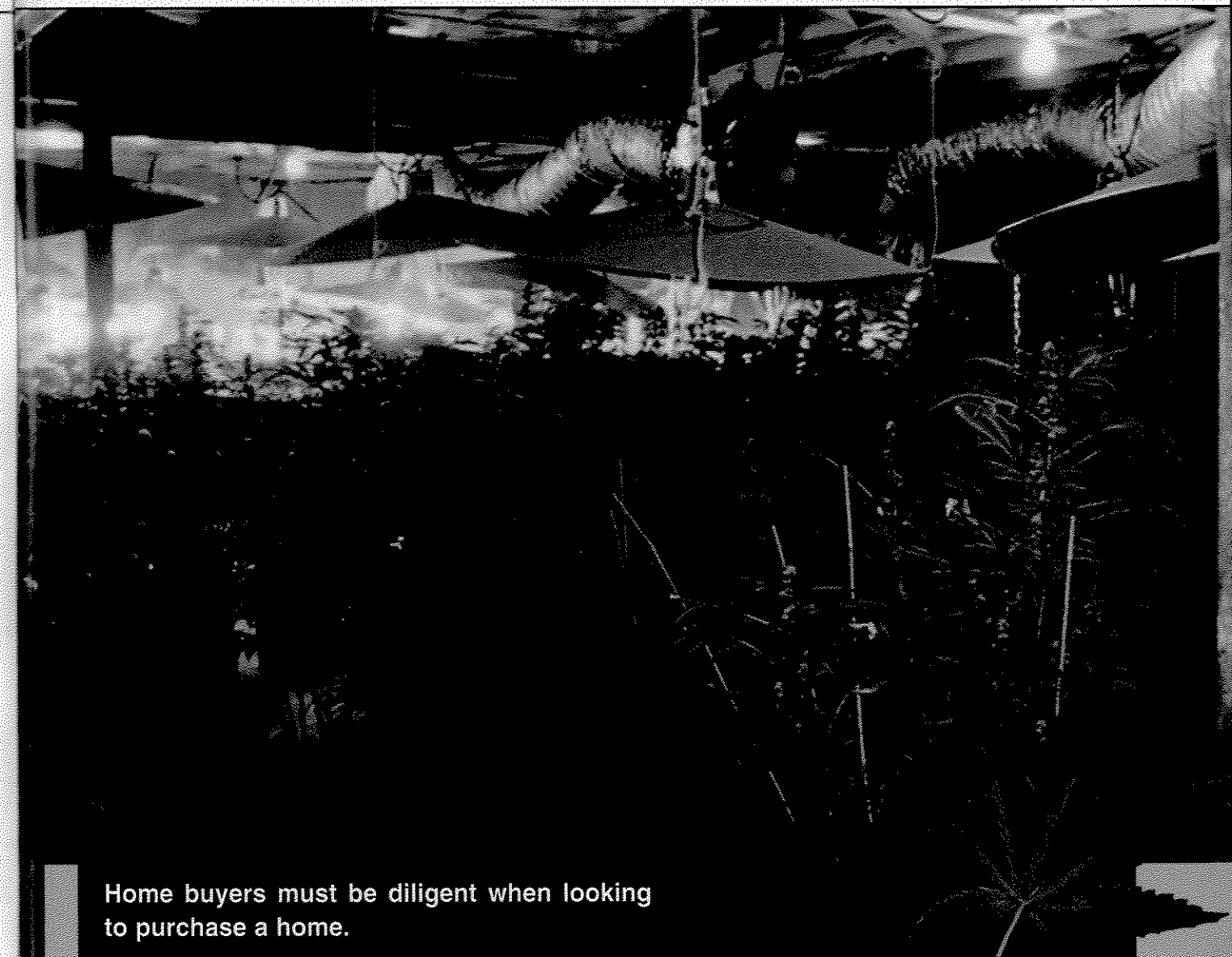
started up the Stop Marihuana Grow Ops Calgary Coalition about eight months ago. As Chairman of this coalition, Colley-Urquhart applauded the work of the members who all committed to their Charter statement: For a safer community, we are joining forces to implement an effective, sustainable, collaborative coalition to stop marihuana grow operations in Calgary. "This is not just a policing problem, this is a community problem that requires a community based, action-oriented, problem solving approach like never before," notes Colley-Urquhart. As a result, several task forces were formed by 44 key participants from the commercial sector (real estate, banking, insurance, CMHC, ENMAX), public safety agencies (CHR, police, fire, emergency services), legislative/judicial sector (City of Calgary Bylaw Services, Licensing, Building Regulations, Federal & Provincial Justice), along with community leaders and business representatives (Calgary Blockwatch, CrimeStoppers, Calgary Apartment Association, Safer Calgary, Federation of Calgary Communities) to tackle this complex community problem.

Each task force has its own action-oriented mandate with the global objective of making Calgary a safer city, and each have incorporated the City of Calgary's pledge to the World Health Organization to make Calgary a place where all people, homes, places of work and streets are safe and to make Calgary an undesirable place for this criminal activity to be conducted.

Colley-Urquhart adds that, "These neighborhood drug factories can be found in nearly every corner of our city, with no community being immune, regardless of location or socio-economic status. Operators can harvest two and three crops a year in each house that has anywhere from 500 to 1500 plants, and can reap hundreds of thousands of dollars a house each year. This money in turn flows back into our community to feed other crimes. This crime affects us all."

Innovative problem-solving approaches must not only focus on seizures, but also on prevention, education, regulation and supply reduction to rid our communities of these neighborhood drug factories. The first of its kind in Canada, the Coalition has recently developed an ambitious comprehensive and integrated workplan that identifies individual tasks, timelines, specific outcomes and budgets. The Coalition will ultimately develop and share the best practices and the action template with other jurisdictions across the country. "We had been working individually with many of these partners over the years but what was missing was an integrated approach to simultaneously tackle the problem from all angles," said S/Sgt. Stuart. "Now we have it. The Coalition has left no stone unturned and already we're beginning to see results," he added.

The Alberta Real Estate Foundation is supporting the Coalition's efforts to educate the Calgary public on the



Home buyers must be diligent when looking to purchase a home.

issue. Governor Kevan Ladner explains why the Foundation has taken a lead role in this initiative: "We support projects that empower all Albertans with information and tools about the real estate industry to help them safeguard their own interests and improve the quality of their real estate transactions."

The Real Estate industry is impacted significantly by the proliferation of grow-op houses: artificially inflated property values, communities with reputations as safe and secure places to live have those reputations tarnished when a grow-op is identified. Home buyers must be diligent when looking to purchase a home. Ask the question of your real estate agent, "Has this home been used as a grow-op?"

The Insurance Bureau of Canada (IBC), another Coalition member, recognizes the economic consequences

to consumers of insurance fraud resulting from concealment of structural damage in grow op houses. As part of the STOP MGOs! Calgary Coalition, IBC plans to work with all of the stakeholders to share information. "In the long run, all consumers pay for insurance fraud. We need to uncover attempted fraud before claims are paid and prosecute as necessary," stated Gwynn Edwards, IBC's Western Director of Investigative Services.

The Canada Revenue Agency is also committed to the STOP MGOs! Calgary Coalition. With the assistance and support of various agencies and partners, their special enforcement program (SEP) mandate is to combat organized crime through enforcement of the various Federal Acts the Agency administers. "We intend to tax the proceeds of crime, thereby reducing the financial incentive of MGO operators," states Marcel Stauch, SEP team leader with the

Investigations Division of the Calgary Tax Services Office. "This partnership has allowed us to cultivate information sharing opportunities between agencies and derive significant benefits."

The tentacles of organized crime behind illegal MGOs are extensive and have crept into other business sectors. Although the vast majority of people who work in those sectors are honest and law-abiding, a small minority are part of a web that provide services such as illegal electrical wiring, ventilation modification and even construction of homes to a specified stage of completion for MGO operators. They call on their own electricians to set up illegal electric meter bypasses, creating massive and highly dangerous electrical octopuses, making the risk of fire 40 times greater in a grow-op house. Temperatures in these houses are at extreme intensities, and there is a high risk of electrocution as a result of the dangerous mix of water and bare electrical wires. A magnetic field created where these electric bypasses enter the house is a serious shock hazard to any unsuspecting child who might be retrieving a stray ball. Holes are cut into ceilings and floors to run ventilation pipes from floor to floor and into attics, compromising structural integrity.

The dangerous mix of chemical nutrients to accelerate crop growth and kill fungus are vented outside or even into sewers, while re-venting of furnaces to circulate air to growing plants re-circulates exhaust fumes back into the house, creating hazards to people and the environment. Chemicals are also recklessly disposed into the sewer system, lanes and other inappropriate places. Toxic mold and airborne spores produced from the combination of high humidity and heat is a severe health hazard to those living in the home, and to the public response teams, including police, fire, health inspectors and the others who must enter the house as part of an MGO take-down operation.

As part of Alberta's Organized Crime Strategy to enhance existing integrated programs to combat priority crimes of methamphetamine production and distribution and marihuana grow ops, the Alberta Solicitor General, the Honorable Harvey Cenaiko has dedicated additional funding that will increase the number of full-time SAMIT investigators this fall by 14 officers. "That brings our SAMIT complement to 15 officers. These new positions will significantly impact the number of grow ops we can target and take-down," stated S/Sgt. Stuart.

The public needs to know what to look for when they suspect an MGO in their neighborhood including the typical signs of no snow on the roof in winter, curtains and blinds closed, and windows and outside walls sweating from the high

ORGANIZED CRIME HAS INFILTRATED MANY SECTORS

humidity levels. However, in an effort to thwart neighbor suspicions, operators try to stay one step ahead by making MGO houses appear 'lived in' by hiring crop-sitters with children to occupy the home. "These young, helpless victims of crime are brought into an explosive and highly dangerous environment for the sake of profit," said Colley-Urquhart. "Endangering children by exposing them to all of the risks and harms of drug activity constitutes child abuse and must be dealt with using a heavy hand."

An in-depth review of current legislation with a view to identifying gaps and how to enhance what is in place is the focus of the Legislative/Judicial Task Force, co-chaired by Bill Bruce, Director of City Bylaw Services. "We're analyzing every aspect of grow operations, from start-up to take-down so that we can clearly identify where the regulations need to be. It is our intent to regulate the industries that supply and support these illegal operations to the max and make it so difficult they won't want to do business here," said Bruce.

ENMAX has also stepped up to the plate as an active member of the Coalition to look at ways to address electricity theft, which is estimated to be in the millions of dollars. "We feel our staff can offer unique expert advice on personal safety, power consumption and by-pass and information about the electrical equipment being used" says Terry Koch, Government & Community Relations Manager. ENMAX Power staff is working closely with the Calgary Police Service to address the theft of power and other safety issues related to marihuana grow ops.

Colley-Urquhart concluded by stating, "This isn't a six month operation. We're in this for the long haul. Calgarians want to know that we are doing something about this problem and that we are all working together. I can assure them on behalf of all the partners that we are. Clearly, this is a growing problem that we, as Calgarians cannot ignore." As Colley-Urquhart says, "This is not just a policing problem. This is something that affects all of us, and we don't want these people doing business in our city. We now need our citizens to join the efforts of the Coalition to clamp down from every angle."

HELP LINE!

Calgary Crimestoppers 1-800-222-TIPS (8477)
Calgary Police Service Organized Crime
Control Section 206-8388



Let's nip grow-ops in the bud.

Grow-ops are destroying property - and ruining lives. Together we can stop the damage. If you see something suspicious around your neighbourhood please call Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-TIPS or visit www.calgarycrimestoppers.org

Alberta Real Estate Foundation supports the efforts of the **STOP MGOs! Calgary Coalition**.
Learn more at www.aref.ab.ca



The Alberta Real Estate Foundation supports real estate initiatives that enhance the real estate industry and benefit the people of Alberta. Our projects address important issues:

ISSUE: Rising energy bills and the environmental impact in home building and living.

PROJECT: We proudly support Alberta Ecotrust's Ecohome, an environmentally healthy home built to educate Calgarians about their environmental choices.

Learn more at www.albertaecotrust.com

ISSUE: Did you know Alberta's Residential and Tenancy Act recently changed?

PROJECT: We have supported the development of a new website providing information on laws for Alberta's tenants and landlords

Learn more at www.landlordandtenant.com

www.aref.ab.ca

