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Breaking ground in the field

Women in property development are hard to find, but they do exist

TRICIA LESLIE

Women have come a long way, baby. But they still have much further to go – especially when it comes to breaking into traditionally male-dominated working environments, such as the construction trades, and in other areas that lead to residential or commercial developing and building.

In Metro Vancouver, there are a handful of women who are listed as president and/or CEO of local building and development companies – but they are hard to find amid the many men who head up the same companies.

This, despite the fact that medieval mindsets condemning or outlawing female intelligence are history, or at least, fast becoming relics – and rightly so. It is 2010, after all, we live in a modern, highly technological world.

So where are the women? A 2007 SFU report (prepared with the support of the B.C. Construction Association) tells us the percentage of women in the construction trades in B.C. has increased only slightly, from 0.7 per cent in 1971 to 3.1 per cent in 2006 – a figure lower than the national average (3.2 per cent in 2001 and 3.4 per cent in 2006).

For Diane Delves, getting into the building aspect of residential and commercial projects was always a goal – one that she has reached, and surpassed.

Now president and CEO of Quantum Properties Inc., Delves started out in real estate and boasts more than 25 years of real estate experience, including sales, appraisal, management and development. She was founder and principal of her own Fraser Valley real estate appraisal firm, which she ran successfully for more than 10 years. She began her career as a property developer while still running her appraisal business, and currently has several residential multi-



Diane Delves, president and CEO of Quantum Properties, is one of a handful of women in the sector with the same kind of position. She'd like to see more females entering the property development field. INLA Leslie/Photo

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Starts up, sales not as busy as December

Housing starts in Metro Vancouver were up by 50 per cent in January compared to the same month last year, Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation reports.

In the Vancouver Census Metropolitan Area, 917 new starts broke ground last month; Surrey led the way with 295 new housing starts, followed closely by Vancouver, with 234 starts, says the CMHC.

"Stronger new home construction in January was a continuation of the trend that began in the latter part of 2009," says CMHC senior market analyst Robyn Adamache. "This trend is forecast to be sustained over the coming months."

Provincial home starts surged to 24,800 units in January, compared to 20,700 in December. At the national level, housing starts rose to 186,000 units last month, from 176,000 units in December.

Home sales in B.C. are up compared to last January, but down compared to December 2009, reports the B.C. Real Estate Association. Residential sales in the province climbed by 118 per cent to 4,619 units in January, compared to the same month last year, while the BCREA reports. But January sales declined by 16 per cent compared to December.

"Home sales in the province eased in January as a result of waning pent-up demand and eroded affordability," says BCREA chief economist Cameron Muir. "While low mortgage interest rates will continue to entice many homebuyers through the spring market, consumer demand is expected to moderate from its frenetic year-end pace."

The B.C. residential sales dollar volume increased 160 per cent to \$2.27 billion in January compared to the same time last year, while the average industry listing price climbed 19 per cent to \$491,571 over the same period.

"Upward pressure on home sales, particularly in Victoria, Vancouver and the Fraser Valley, is beginning to slow as fewer home sales and a larger inventory reduce the chance of multiple offers," Muir notes.

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Ottawa announces new mortgage rules

TRICIA LESLIE

Canadian Finance Minister Jim Flaherty announced changes to mortgage rules in Ottawa Tuesday, aimed at preventing homebuyers from landing in financial difficulty when rates rise.

Flaherty, after consulting with major Canadian lenders, outlined a number of measured steps "to support the long-term stability of Canada's housing market and continue to encourage home ownership for Canadians."

"Canada's housing market is healthy, stable and supported by our country's solid economic fundamentals," Flaherty said.

"However, a key lesson of the global financial crisis is that early policy action can help prevent negative trends from developing."

The rule adjustments for government-backed insured mortgages break down into three components. Ottawa will now:

- require that all borrowers meet the standards for a five-year fixed-rate mortgage even if they choose a mortgage with a lower interest rate and shorter term. This initiative will help Canadians prepare for higher interest rates in the future.

- lower the maximum amount Canadians can withdraw in refinancing their mortgages to 90 per cent from 95 per cent of the value of their homes. This will help ensure home ownership is a more effective way to save.

- Require a minimum down payment of 20 per cent for government-backed mortgage insurance on non-occupied properties purchased for speculation.

"There's no clear evidence of a housing bubble, but we're taking proactive, prudent and cautious steps today to help prevent one. Our government is acting to help prevent Canadian households from getting overextended and acting to help prevent some lenders from facilitating it," Flaherty said.

"If some lenders aren't willing to act themselves, we will act."

The adjustments to the mortgage insurance guarantee framework are slated to come into effect on April 19.

Still time to register for GVHBA workshop

The Greater Vancouver Home Builders' winter session of What's New in Homebuilding, a popular workshop for people who are contemplating having a custom home built for them, is now set for March 6.

Presented in partnership with Canada Housing and Mortgage Corporation, the event features technology experts from the GVHBA. Workshop topics cover everything from green building practices to ventilation systems to how energy choices affect costs.

The full-day workshop runs March 6 from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Best Western Coquitlam Hotel and Conference Centre (319 North Rd., Coquitlam; Salon A), with lunch and coffee breaks provided in the cost (\$75 per person or \$130 per couple). Registration is limited; call the GVHBA at 778-565-4288 to register.



An artist's rendering of Mahogany, a Quantum Properties project set to go before Abbotsford council shortly.

"Skill is not according to gender"

Off the front: "I don't mind being underestimated."

Diana Delves, president and CEO

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family projects on the go in Abbotsford and Port Coquitlam. And those don't include the now-sold-out Viva on the Park, a multi-family lowrise project, and a completed office building that is still attracting tenants.

"It was always my dream to be in property development," Delves says during an interview in her Abbotsford office. "I think that's the fascinating part of the business. It's the whole creative process — you start with a bare piece of land ... it's very rewarding to see the result at the end."

A licensed builder, Delves notes that Quantum does its own construction, and tends to focus on building affordable homes that entice young or first-time homebuyers into the market.

Although she works in a male-dominated industry, Delves says that hasn't really ever had an impact on her decision to become a builder.

"I've always felt completely equal to any man," she says. "Sometimes, I find I'm easily dismissed by some men, but I've got no problem dealing with them. I don't mind being underestimated."

Delves would like to see more women in the field, and to that end, offers two scholarships at the University of the Fraser Valley — one for drafting (men and women), and one for women in the trades (women only).

Wima Leung would also like to see more women on the development/building side of the industry.

As president and founder of WISA Healthy Homes, Leung was into green, sustainable building before they became keywords in the industry.

A licensed R2000 builder (R2000 was developed by Natural Resources Canada and industry to promote the use of cost-effective, energy-efficient building practices and technologies), certified residential builder and



Wima Leung with an Olympic torch.

certified renovator and aging-in-place specialist. Leung remembers starting off by studying engineering in Hong Kong — and being "the only girl in a class of all boys."

She gained international experience in different areas of the industry, from engineering consultant to environmental protection education, and now focuses on building energy-efficient custom homes and renovations through-out Metro Vancouver.

Leung also sits on the NRC committee that is currently striving to improve R2000 standards to better represent a standard in leading-edge technology throughout the sector. Homes built to R2000 standards are among the top one per cent of the most energy-efficient homes built, Leung notes.

"It has a lot of impact, across the entire country," Leung says of sustainable building, and adds that about 30 per cent of our greenhouse gas emissions is related to building.

"If a home's envelope is inefficiently built, you actually are warming up the whole neighbourhood ... I don't believe in building homes you have to tear down in 20-30 years. Why not do it right the first time?" she says.

Leung likes working with other women, and finds they are hard workers and excellent listeners, but says for the most part, she does not notice the male dominance in the industry.

"Sometimes I find it's actually an advantage, being female, but sometimes in can be difficult," she says, and notes the "good companies" will usually have plenty of women on the employee roster.

Kerry Shular, general manager of the property management division for Millennium Development, agrees.

"I have been very fortunate throughout my career to work with some very open-minded, professional men who recognized and rewarded hard work and talent," she says.

"At Millennium, I work side by side with some amazing men and women."

Working in an industry that provides challenges on a daily basis and constantly pushes its workers to learn is edifying, she says, and adds she would love to see more women in the development field.

"We have so much to bring to the development field. It's encouraging to see more and more young women entering not only the development field but related construction fields as well — I hope the trend grows," Shular says.

Greater Vancouver Home Builders' Association CEO Peter Simpson also wants to see more women working at high levels in the sector, and notes the Canadian Home Builders' Association has only ever had one woman president.

"It's very non-traditional for women to get into the industry, but when they do, they're 100 per cent committed to it," Simpson says, and adds the GVHBA supports a local school district carpentry program.

"I'd love to see more women getting into it — the more the merrier ... you can earn some really good money."

Women tend to be more detail-oriented, Simpson notes, and adds he never discussed limitations with his daughters when they were younger.

"I always told them, 'You can do whatever you want to do,'" Simpson says.

"Women have the same choices that men do. I wish they would take more of those non-traditional jobs ... skill is not according to gender."

"To that end, the recommendations in the SFU study include "that a firm commitment be made and active leadership be shown on the part of operators, unions, industry and government to take strategic steps to increase women's participation in trades."

Women may have come a long way, but it is apparent they still have much further to go. And the building sector appears to be a good place to start ...

Baby.

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