

Grow ops sprout in upscale 'burbs

Massive drug operations springing up under noses of unsuspecting residents

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Calgary Herald

Tuesday, May 20, 2008

They're appearing everywhere, from apartments to million-dollar mansions.

So lucrative is the marijuana trade that growers aren't discriminating between low income neighbourhoods and upscale suburbs.

Experts say grow ops are being found in virtually every neighbourhood in Calgary, with major operations leaving homes in a decaying mess of mould costing tens of thousands of dollars to repair.

On May 9, police raided the one of the largest residential marijuana grow operations discovered in the city's history.

The assessed value of the Patterson Crescent S.W. home where 2,445 plants were found is \$1.2 million. Neighbours appear to have had no idea there was a massive grow operation in their midst.

That case reinforces how any neighbourhood in Calgary -- rich or poor -- is potent territory for sophisticated marijuana grow operations.

Due to the clandestine nature of the trade, it's unknown the number of grow ops in the city. Last year, Calgary Health Region inspectors closed dozens of homes where police found evidence of drug operations.

Meanwhile, Roger Morrison, a former sergeant supervisor with the Southern Alberta Marijuana Investigative Team, said that during his time with the unit "we always commonly said we have a minimum of 3,000 in Calgary."

In a recent interview, Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said: "We have no idea at this point whether we have 3,000 grow-op houses or 10,000. But, we do know it's a serious problem."

The Patterson Crescent operation had all the hallmarks of organized crime, says an expert on marijuana grow ops.

Darryl Plecas is a professor at the University College of the Fraser Valley and has studied the marijuana cultivation trade in both British Columbia and Alberta.

Homes in upscale neighbourhoods can prove attractive to pot growers for a number of reasons.

Large homes simply have more room.

"The single most important thing in this case is square footage," Plecas said of the Patterson Crescent grow op. "Twenty-five hundred plants is one hell of a large grow operation for a residential home."

Many such homes are also set off from the property line, he said, making it harder for police to smell marijuana as they gather evidence for a search warrant.

The homes tend to have attached garages -- allowing privacy for the loading and unloading of equipment and plants.

Grow ops have undergone two substantial changes over the years, Plecas said.

They have clearly become larger and increasingly sophisticated in their ability to produce more within the same space.

Secondly, Plecas said, grows in B.C. are proving the single largest source of funding for organized crime.

"People have this impression that they're ma and pa, burnt out hippies, growing a plant or two," he said.

But that's not the case. Plecas's research in both B.C. and Alberta found growers often have lengthy criminal records -- many with convictions for violence.

"We're talking seasoned criminals," Plecas said. "And that also fits to the whole matter organized crime is into it up to its eyeballs."

The profits from growing marijuana are so large that homes prove to be an expendable cost of doing business.

"Most of the time they just don't care how beat-up the house becomes," said Vicki Wearmouth, a Calgary public health inspector specializing in grow ops.

"They can be really in rough shape by the time we go in there with water leaks and that sort of thing."

Wearmouth works closely with police who raid residential grows.

Often, she finds the exhaust from the furnace and hot water tanks are disconnected so CO2 filters out and spurs the growth of plants.

A hole is burrowed through the foundation walls where growers steal electricity and bypass the meter.

Also, Wearmouth said, the amount of equipment used to grow the plants produces a lot of heat.

"If they've been going on for quite some time, there's a significant amount of water damage with the heat," Wearmouth said.

That means a substantial and toxic mould problem. The properties must be "remediated" before they are again habitable.

That can mean the entire home must be gutted to its bare bones; the drywall removed and the insulation stripped out.

Such an extensive process can cost around \$150,000 depending on the size of home, says the executive vice-president of the Calgary Real Estate Board.

"They're scary, for one thing," Ron Esch said of residential grow operations. "They're scary in that there are a lot them out there, and if they are not remediated properly, they are a real problem. They're a risk, they're a real health risk for buyers."

Esch said the real estate industry is doing everything it can to ensure realtors know how to spot a home with a previous grow operation and deal with it correctly.

That's important information to be relayed to buyers, he said.

The concern, Esch said, is when mould has infested the home, but the remediation process

isn't adequate.

Former grow houses are a frustration, he said: "Sometimes innocent people will buy these properties or landlords will end up with these properties that are totally devalued because of these kinds of (grow) operations."

Also at issue, Colley-Urquhart said, is there are no real remediation standards in Canada.

"I have been told by residents . . . that they would move into these houses, and then when they go to hang a picture on the wall, the hammer goes right through the drywall because it's all mouldy and wet."

Esch estimates there are between 25 and 30 former grow-op homes on Calgary's multiple listing service at any one time.

Plecas's research looked at all cases of known marijuana grows in Alberta between 1997 and 2004.

The number of grows was substantially fewer than in B.C., and Plecas credits Alberta with keeping a lid on the problem. He said law enforcement in Alberta has a good record of investigating the complaints that come their way.

Plecas said a substantial difference between the two provinces is that those caught growing marijuana in Alberta are more likely to go to prison -- and for longer periods -- than in B.C. However, he said he's recently seen Alberta judges tending toward lighter sentences.

High power consumption is an emblem of marijuana grow ops. And a former Calgary police officer who left the service in 2007 has developed a special meter to detect those stealing electricity.

Roger Morrison's technology has already led police to four marijuana grows in the Chestermere area. Last year, during a test on a neighbourhood of 603 homes, six of Morrison's meters found nine grow operations in just one hour.

From the outside, only three of those 13 homes had any visible signs they housed a grow op, he said.

"That was extremely surprising for me," Morrison said. "That was an extreme wake-up call for me and some of the guys in the unit that maybe we don't really know how vast this problem is."

Morrison's meter detects atypical consumption between the primary line and the transformers that feed 80 to 100 homes in a neighbourhood.

The technology immediately notifies the utility company when a primary line shows a home with excessive consumption.

Someone from the utility can then test the particular transformers and find out which residence is the culprit.

"If you turn your hot tub on, that's not going to trigger this," Morrison said. "If you weld for two hours, that's not going to trigger this. It has to be a consistent, large power draw."

He said Canada has become a haven for marijuana production: "There's no way the amount of marijuana that we're producing in Canada can be consumed by Canadians.

"A vast majority of it is getting shipped down to the States where the profits are so much larger."

Meanwhile, tracking power consumption that's not stolen has helped push out residential marijuana grows in some jurisdictions of British Columbia.

Three years ago, the Surrey fire service began an experiment.

"I just was so frustrated with the lack of response from the system -- (it) did not seem to be deterring -- that we invented something different to achieve the same result and that's getting (grow operations) out of our neighbourhoods," Surrey fire chief Len Garis said in a recent interview.

The department obtained power consumption data from BC Hydro on homes that were suspected of growing marijuana.

Safety investigations based on high power consumption found nearly 94 per cent of the homes had serious electrical problems -- in almost all cases, they housed a grow op.

In 2006, B.C. passed legislation requiring BC Hydro to provide the addresses of residences with unusually high power consumption.

The first set of data in Surrey revealed almost 1,000 homes that met the threshold and were the likely abodes of marijuana grow ops.

Notices are posted on the doors, warning of an inspection in 48 hours. And while that gives time for growers to move out their crop, the safety inspections prove an annoyance and disruption to the trade.

That has prodded many growers to simply leave Surrey, Garin said, noting complaints concerning grow ops dropped by 38 per cent last year.

"It seems to be so that they're just simply moving out, because it's all about the money," Garin said. "And if they're not able to produce a crop undisturbed, they're going to lose money, their investment."

The legislation, however, is facing several court challenges from B.C. residents whose homes were inspected.

Last fall, a report from Alberta's Crime Reduction and Safe Communities Task Force suggested the province look at legislation similar to that in B.C.

Alberta Justice will work on the recommendation in due course, said spokesman David Dear. He noted "there are legal issues involved around that kind of information, as well as there are privacy considerations."

The solicitor general of Alberta also noted in a recent interview that many grow ops are simply stealing power and bypassing the meters.

Fred Lindsay said by this fall the province will have two investigative teams that will act under civil law.

If they inspect a home and find something awry, Lindsay said, "they will then have the ability to lock that house down for 90 days."

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