

Local resident shocked to find mayor was her 'neighbour from hell'?



By Mike Pickford

An elderly Orangeville resident says she was shocked when she first learned that her 'neighbour from hell' was actually Orangeville Mayor Jeremy Williams.

Now 76, Fran Rusk has lived in her split-level semi-detached bungalow on Marion Street for 26 years. She has enjoyed fruitful relationships with many of her neighbours over that time, all except one - the relatively recent owner of the property directly connected to her own.

Fran says the issues began approximately five years ago, about when Mayor Williams took ownership of 73 Marion Street. The home, it would appear, was purchased as an investment, with the mayor opting to rent out the property. Fran estimates that since 2013 there have been 'five or six' different families living there at various stages. But the last occupants had moved out roughly 2 1/2 years ago and she says the house has been left to 'rot' ever since.

This particular issue blew up on social media last week after local realtor Sandy Brown, who is challenging Mr. Williams in October's municipal election, made a post highlighting the 'disgusting' condition of the property Mr. Williams listed as his residence when filing his nomination papers.

In photos accompanying the post, the bungalow is seen to be in poor condition, with significant damage to the roof, front window and front entrance. The driveway of the property was overgrown with weeds, and the backyard was also overgrown. The weeds and grass have since been cut.

Ms. Rusk noted those photos offered something of a sneak peek into the lives of every resident of Marion Street, who have had to put up with the 'eyesore' for well over 18 months. She told the Citizen that a group of residents came together back in 2016 to form a petition, which, she says, unfortunately amounted to nothing. More recently, she had worked closely with a neighbour living at number 67 to come up with a plan to confront Mayor Williams about the deteriorating state of the property, but that individual passed away before any real progress was made.

'We had numerous conversations about it. I can't really see next door from my property, but she was sitting right there and seeing the full extent of the non-activity at the house. It's a regret now that we never got the issue resolved,' Fran said.

She estimates at least half a dozen families who lived in the neighbourhood for numerous years have sold and moved, with at least a couple admitting the condition of number 73 played a part in their decision.

On top of the external visual concerns, which, at times, also included mounds of garbage left to rot beside the house, Fran says there have been numerous issues with the conditions inside, too. She noted she's had raccoons, squirrels, cats and mice venture into her property, notably in the loft space, after seemingly gaining entry through number 73. She also recounts an issue she faced six months ago when her basement flooded as a result of water seeping through the wall her property shares with Mr. Williams' property.

'This past winter I had water in the basement constantly when I was down there doing laundry. I thought it was my washing machine leaking at first, but it turned out it was coming through the basement wall. I kept cleaning it up and the water kept coming and coming. It's lucky I have a drain down there, otherwise the damage would have been disastrous,' Ms. Rusk said.

The problem was fixed 'within a day' of reaching out to Mayor Williams, which led Fran to ask the question why other such issues haven't been addressed. The roof the two properties share needs a complete replacement, while it's obvious that other repairs need to

take place before the property could be considered as being in livable condition.

She has called on Mr. Williams to sell the property if he has no intention of repairing it. In a brief statement to the Citizen, the Mayor confirmed he is currently in negotiations to sell.

He said the house "is one of many properties my family owns. It will be refurbished and then sold once the lease holder's lease has expired," Mayor Williams stated. "As a purchaser is already in negotiations with us, no other details will be shared at this point." Mayor Williams fielded no other questions and declined to make any further comment.

On being advised that the mayor intends to sell, Ms. Rusk said that does not excuse his non-actions over the past five years. She condemned Mr. Williams, who last month helped escort Communities in Bloom judges around town, showcasing the community's most beautiful gardens, for not taking more pride in his personal property.

"Jeremy hasn't done anything with that home. I spoke to each of the tenants that were in that house? He didn't fix anything, there were leaks. The usual things a landlord needs to take care of (he didn't do)," Fran said.

"That's what I don't understand. Not even considering the fact he's mayor, but just being a good community citizen, why wouldn't he have wanted to maintain that property? There just doesn't seem to be any reason."

She added, "It's a shame. It's an absolute shame. I don't intend to sell anytime soon, but I would absolutely say the state of the neighbouring property has had an impact on the value of my home. I'm not down the street or across the road, I'm attached to it."

"This is a nice neighbourhood, I've lived here a long time. It's unfortunate that one property, one individual has caused so many people in this area so many issues. It's not neighbourly behaviour. It's not the behaviour of someone who cares about their community."