

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/local/322210_housemoving03.html

Frank-Michael Rebhan bought this 1917 Craftsman house -- slated for demolition -- for \$1, then had it moved to his Phinney Ridge property five blocks away. (Andy Rogers / P-I)

Imagine paying just \$1 for a home -- plus moving expenses

Tuesday, July 3, 2007

Last updated 7:11 a.m. PT

By AUBREY COHEN

P-I REPORTER

Frank-Michael Rebhan recently bought a beautiful 1917 Phinney Ridge Craftsman house for \$1.

The catch was moving the home five blocks, where it would replace the smaller, older house already on his property in the neighborhood.

"It all started with me walking my dog one night in late January," Rebhan explained. He saw the house was slated for demolition and tracked down the owner, who agreed to sell -- if Rebhan took it away within two months.

House moving isn't a particularly new business, but it's becoming more common in Seattle and other cities as denser development displaces nice, old houses. Several Puget Sound companies move houses, but one is now seeking out such endangered homes to resell before they get demolished, and Seattle officials are considering rule changes to make house moving easier.

"Sometimes the grandest of the houses are the ones that are on the main avenues," said Jeff McCord, the Seattle representative of Nickel Brothers House Moving, a British Columbia company that set up Washington operations about a year and a half ago.

But in Seattle and other cities, these main streets also are allowing higher-density condominiums, apartments and townhouses, McCord said.

Seattle has permitted seven houses to move within the city and two to move out of the city in the past few years, with five of those moves coming in the past year, said Michael Dorcy, a senior land-use planner for the city. Nickel Brothers has moved about 12 houses in the Seattle area since its local office opened about two years ago, and it moves or raises more than 300 houses a year in Washington and British Columbia.

Advocates for moving threatened homes say it keeps a vast amount of waste out of landfills, saves a developer about \$10,000 in demolition costs per house and preserves beautiful old houses for new owners who pay less than it would cost to build something new.

Rebhan's house includes classic Craftsman features such as stained-glass windows and ample wood, including wainscoting, columns, box-beam ceilings and built-in bookcases.

"I think a lot of the stuff that goes up these days is not built as sturdy and craftsmanlike as houses were built around the turn of the century and in the first decades of the 20th century," he said.

Historic Houston, a non-profit preservation organization, has a program to save historic homes from demolition and find them new owners. But Christine Palmer, a preservation advocate at Historic Seattle, says moving a home takes it out of its context.

"It's not really preservation," she said. "It's our method of last resort."

McCord touted the environmental benefits of recycling a house slated for demolition, saying the company's moves in Seattle alone have kept the equivalent of more than 800 trees out of landfills.

"When we get fully up to speed, that number could reach over 2,500 trees-worth of fine, old-growth lumber being reused per year, based on an average of saving about four average-sized houses per month from the Seattle area," he said.

Nickel Brothers finds such threatened houses, buys them for \$1, markets them for resale and then moves them at the buyers' expense to the buyers' site. If a nice, easily moved house doesn't sell before a builder needs it removed, the company will move it to its 2-acre site in Everett. The company advertises other houses getting close to their demolition date with appeals such as "time is running out" and "save this house."

"We have to make a judgment call sometimes," McCord said. "Sadly there are far, far more houses that get demolished than we could possibly save."

City officials have accommodated moves by granting temporary permits to allow a house on its new site before a foundation is in place and by expediting such requests, Dorcy said. "We've made it work, but if we had a lot of these things, it would be difficult to do."

If builders thought of moving a house early on in the redevelopment process, it would allow more time to process needed permits and build a foundation at the new site before the move, he said.

Permitting house moves would work better if the city had a temporary permit provision specifically for moving houses, Dorcy said. He also praised one of McCord's suggested incentives -- demolition fees that would be a low, set amount if builders give a home a chance to be moved or a percentage of the value of buildings on a property otherwise.

"It really would get the developers early on looking at the possibility," Dorcy said. He said city officials have discussed new policies for house moving, but have not made it a priority.

Nickel Brothers typically starts planning a move a month or two before the move and preparations to the house one to two weeks in advance. They generally move a house very early on Saturday or Sunday mornings and set it on temporary piles at the new site so a new foundation can be built under it. They return 30 days later and lower the house into place.

Rebhan's process actually started with tearing down his small, old house, although he did bring in a company to save any reusable materials. He estimated the whole process would cost him nearly \$250,000 -- not a bad price for a nice new house -- but not a steal.

Viking Bank, meanwhile, may take advantage of the growing house-moving market by offering a single loan that funds the house, land, move and construction of a new foundation.

The idea came out of a meeting with McCord about Nickel Brothers' business accounts, said Dana Giove, Viking's vice president and mortgage manager.

"If there's something someone else doesn't do, we look at that as an opportunity for us," Giove said.

And it's a great idea, she added. "We love the thought of a recycled home."

P-I reporter Aubrey Cohen can be reached at 206-448-8362 or aubrecycohen@seattlepi.com.

© 1998-2007 Seattle Post-Intelligencer