



# PORT TOWNSEND & JEFFERSON COUNTY LEADER

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## Recycled houses sail to PT

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Two houses that were removed from lots in Victoria, B.C., were brought by barge to Port Townsend last week for delivery to new owners. The Canadian company that moved the houses, Nickel Brothers, specializes in moving buildings, and maintains an inventory of recycled houses and other buildings on its website. – Photo by Susan Colby

Clear glass goes in one container, colored another.

Papers in the green one and plastics in yet one more.

You take your old clothes to the thrift or consignment store. Your used car oil goes to the hazardous waste place for recycling. You consider yourself conscientious when taking care of the environment.

But what do you do when you have a whole house that needs to be recycled? It won't fit in the bin and it's hard to put in the consignment store. And besides, how on earth would you get it there?

The first thought in the minds of most people is "demolish it."

But on second thought, you know that's wasteful and probably going to cost you a lot.

Nickel Brothers, a company in Victoria, B.C., has come up with a solution that is a "win" for everyone involved. Houses are saved, demolition materials stay out of the landfills, and both sellers and buyers of the houses save money.

Last week, anyone looking out into Port Townsend Bay would have done a double take. They would have seen a little tug hauling a large barge – not an unusual sight, but its load was highly unusual. Two small houses rested

comfortably, ready for unloading at Decatur Street, near the Aladdin Motel. When the tide was right, the barge inched its way onto the beach and heavy-duty trucks anchored it while the two houses were gently maneuvered onto the waiting house-moving trucks. In the dead of night, they crawled their way out to the land at the northwest corner of Fredericks Street and State Route 19, where they are now parked for storage. Several hours later, the two houses were planted on the land, jacked up, braced and leveled.

### Brothers in business

Jeremy Nickel is one of the three brothers who own Nickel Brothers. Indistinguishable from the rest of his crew in overalls and hardhat, Nickel is completely involved in the actual business of moving the houses. He is also deeply involved in the environmental impacts and benefits of saving houses.

He sees it as a win/win/win situation. The environment wins. The original homeowner wins and the new owner wins.

The environment benefits in several ways, such as by saving trees.

"An average new house uses about 1,200 square feet of lumber, which equates to about 50 fir trees," he said. Saving houses also keeps waste out of the landfills.

"We are running out of space in our landfills," he continued, pointing out that Vancouver Island now ships its waste to Eastern Washington and that 50 percent of waste going into the landfills in Portland is from demolition material. "In the Cascadia region, which includes British Columbia, more than 1,000 houses are demolished every month."

Recycling a house also can be a financial advantage to the house's original owner. Demolishing a house is expensive. Nickel said that in British Columbia, the owner is charged 5 percent of the assessed value of the house in demolition fees. Nickel Brothers pays a minimal amount to transfer title and then moves it, saving the owner thousands of dollars.

Buyers also benefit from buying a recycled house. Rising construction and labor costs have pushed building a new home out of reach for many people. Buying and renovating or restoring a recycled house can result in significant savings.

And while not all the houses are of historical significance, and some need a bit of TLC, Nickel said, "The integrity is there."

The older houses used far superior materials and old-growth lumber. The floor joists are often full-length, 36-foot 2x8s and 2x10s tied in with shiplap to make them sturdy.

"This is something you won't find in today's construction," he said.

Nickel cautioned that to make buying a recycled house a viable option, the house and land should cost no more than 60 percent of the average cost of a new house in that specific area. For instance, the average cost of a house on a residential lot in Jefferson County is currently more than \$230,000, so the combined cost of land and house should not exceed \$140,000.

But not all houses can be saved and not all building sites are appropriate locations. Nickel insists that first a study must be done.

"Some houses are in locations we can't reach, he said. "Or the cost of moving utilities, like electrical overheads, is prohibitive."

The destination location must also be approved. If the road to it is too narrow or the property too far from the off-loading point, Nickel Brothers might not be able to deliver a house there.

### Perka has her own

According to Janet Perka of Port Townsend, sales representative for the company, potential buyers must be prepared to commit to the process. She speaks from experience, as she has spent the past few months preparing her land for delivery of her own recycled cottage.

"Potential buyers should get all the infrastructure in place first," she said, as finding the right house can take time, often a year or so. Nickel Brothers posts its new houses on its website, and buyers can see them "in person" by

visiting the company's storage facility in Victoria.

Perka recommends that once a buyer has found a location, Nickel Brothers should be brought in to inspect it to ensure that the location is accessible.

"Then make sure all the utilities are available," she said, as that can be the most time-consuming part of the process if the buyer still needs to bring in electricity, install a septic system and drill a well. She said that getting the actual building permit takes only about a month.

Perka is no newcomer to recycled homes. Growing up in Canada, she lived in a World War II home her father moved onto her grandparents' farm near Toronto. Now she lives in a cottage outside of Port Townsend that has been moved three times, each time by Jeff Monroe of Monroe House Movers.

Perka laughed, saying, "Jeff told me that he wouldn't move it again, that when people move on with their lives, they don't take their houses with them."

Recently, Nickel Brothers worked with the City of Seattle on a project for Habitat for Humanity.

"The city bought four houses and the property and donated them to Habitat," Nickel said. "We moved the houses and donated part of the moving costs."

Recycled houses also might be a source of low-cost housing. Nickel recounted a recent incident where they tried to find a buyer for a large Victorian-era barracks. They were unable to find anyone, and the building eventually was demolished. Ironically, the local newspaper ran the advertisement for the property opposite a story about the lack of low-cost housing in the city.

"People, and developers in particular, need to be educated about these possibilities," he said.

It takes vision to bring an old house back to life, but for those with the time, energy and desire, saving a house can be a very rewarding endeavor. One of the houses delivered to Port Townsend has already found a home with Dee Tour du Monde, but the other is looking for another visionary.

## Related Links

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