

Sleepless in south Calgary

Fred Kerr, For The Calgary Herald

Published: Monday, October 23, 2006

I grew up next door to a family who must have been raised by wolves.

Every morning at 5 a.m., Mrs. Boor fired up her ancient diesel Mercedes outside my window and left it running for half an hour as she got ready for work.

To this day, I struggle both with sleep and an aversion to Daimler Benz vehicles.

The Boors' backyard was filled with old car parts, boats and a fat, glistening slug of an Airstream trailer.

Long before today's anti-cat regulations, which encourage neighbours to denounce each other anonymously to the bylaw police, Mr. Boor shot at our cat with a pellet rifle.

Now that we have our own place, one neighbour regularly keeps us awake with their racket. Requests for compassion have failed. The noise is a gravel crusher and the neighbour is an aboriginal band.

The nightly nightmare has been going on for months. Sleepless this summer, I called the friendly manager of the Tsuu T'ina's gravel crusher, who explained that his crew is working flat out to harvest a gravel deposit before they build their Eaglestone Casino on the site. He assured me that the worst would be over by mid-September.

Now it's late October and the cacophony continues. The Calgary Police Service won't enforce noise bylaws on Tsuu T'ina land, despite the fact the din created there affects many Calgarians.

The gravel from that crusher feeds the Sarcee asphalt plant, which first blemished the southwestern shores of Glenmore reservoir in summer 2004.

The Tsuu T'ina didn't get the required federal environmental permits for it.

More than 500 Calgarians have complained of foul-smelling emissions from the illegal plant. Children have suffered stomach aches and burning eyes.

A local environmentalist asserts the plant burns dirty, used oil rather than cleaner natural gas. See calgarycleanair.com.

The federal government is now keeping the plant open while it assesses emissions. Federal Indian Affairs Minister Jim Prentice wants to wait for the results of stack tests.

If I built an asphalt plant, without a permit that burned dirty fuel upwind from a residential area and 500 Calgarians complained it was making their children sick, would I be granted that leniency?

If any other company had acted this way, the plant would have been shuttered immediately and everyone would rightly be screaming about corporate responsibility.

If you created a huge noise at night for months, let your house fall apart, parked on your lawn and allowed litter and weeds to take over, you'd expect at least a fine.

We can't entirely blame the Tsuu T'ina, who are reacting rationally to a lack of consequences for their actions. It's a hassle to get an environmental permit.

It costs more to cloak a gravel crusher with noise abatement material, as is common in industry, than to let it clank all night.

It's more expensive to fuel an asphalt plant with clean natural gas than with dirty oil.

It certainly cost more to maintain Black Bear Crossing properly, as the military did, than to let it degenerate into squalor, as the Tsuu T'ina have.

We have regulations to promote safety, health and neighbourly behaviour.

These rules are useless unless enforced without regard to ethnicity.

Incredibly, having evacuated the squatters on the "discovery" of asbestos in government-built buildings, the feds may still let them back into Black Bear Crossing.

Ottawa is removing asbestos from Parliament Hill buildings and generally treating it as a toxic substance for most Canadians, yet has allowed Canadian soldiers and native squatters to be exposed to it at Black Bear Crossing, and encourages Quebec to export Canadian asbestos to the developing world.

Perhaps some bureaucrat decided that if it's all right to expose thousands of Calgarians to oil fumes, it's OK to expose a few hundred squatters to asbestos. I don't agree.

If any of this angers you, write to local MP Stephen Harper and Indian Affairs Minister Prentice.

The feds should demolish Black Bear Crossing, close the asphalt plant until it earns a proper permit and oblige the gravel crusher to install noise mitigation.

It's time to stop this insanity.

Fred Kerr lives in Calgary © The Calgary Herald 2006