

Family flees 'house of horrors'

Faces bankruptcy after they discover recently purchased

Stony Plain home infected with toxic levels of black mould

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EDMONTON - A Stony Plain family is facing financial ruin after they unknowingly bought a house infected with toxic levels of black mould.

Steve and Norma Dima bought the 1970s-era home on a sprawling 1.6-hectare property just west of Stony Plain in a private sale in April.

The Dimas did not have the house inspected before agreeing to the sale.

Now, just months after moving in and weeks after tests revealed unsafe levels of mould in the home, the Dimas are sleeping in a minivan in their own backyard.

Their savings are already stretched from the down payment on the \$264,000 home and Steve Dima's income as a pipefitter won't cover both the mortgage and the rent on whatever new home they find. The cost of demolishing the old house and building a new one is even further out of their reach.

The Dimas, who are in their mid 50s, don't think they can recover from a bankruptcy. But at this point, their options are limited.

"We've got our backs against the wall," Steve Dima said. The Dimas moved in to the home over the May long weekend.

As they carted in furniture and unpacked suitcases, the family noticed the smell of incense hanging in the air.

An upset Steve Dima sits in the backyard of his house under an outdoor shelter where he and his wife are living. The house they recently purchased in a subdivision west of Stony Plain was condemned due to toxic mould they discovered after they moved in.

Mould grows in another building on the property.

It was not the first time. When Steve Dima examined the property in the spring, the same strong smell was always present.

At the time, he thought nothing of it. The property was not in great shape.

The floor of the garage was layered with thick piles of pigeon waste and cats roamed freely through the house.

The incense was probably just an effort to cover up their smells, Dima thought.

But one morning, just weeks after the family arrived, one of the two Dima boys came up the stairs from his basement bedroom complaining of a headache.

There was a strange smell downstairs, he said, and it wasn't the incense.

Indeed, as the one smell retreated, another took its place. The unmistakable stink of mould soon pervaded the house.

Capital Health inspected the property in June. Their tests revealed unsafe levels of aspergillus, penicillium and cladosporium in the air.

In high enough concentrations, all three can cause serious damage to the human immune system.

Next, a private inspector came to determine the size of the problem.

John Dallinger found chunks of black mould caked into the insulation when he opened the walls. He measured the moisture in the basement - necessary for the mould to grow -- at 99.9 per cent.

Dallinger advised the Dimas to leave the home and everything in it, and not return. By this point, Norma Dima's voice was already ragged from what doctors told her were spores infecting her throat and lungs. She is waiting for blood tests to reveal if her liver is damaged.

"It's the house of horrors," Norma Dima said, her voice straining.

For now, as their parents sleep in the family van, the two teenage boys are living with relatives. A picnic table sheltered by a plastic tarp holds the only possessions the family took with them when they left: a couple of garbage bags full of clothing, some personal files and all the records related to the sale.

Norma Dima spends every day at the table, trying to find a solution.

Right now, she is trying to have the county declare that the home was never properly certified when it was built in 1974. But if that does not work, the Dimas's only hope may be to go after the previous owner. That could be tough.

The general legal principle in such cases is "let the buyer beware," said Denis Noel, a lawyer who taught real estate law at the University of Alberta for 24 years.

That means unless the contract stipulates that the vendor has to reveal significant defects, the buyer is out of luck.

However, there are exceptions, and the Dima case may well be one.

If the condition is dangerous and the vendor is aware of the problem, generally speaking, they do have to say something. If they keep quiet, a court can make them pay whatever it costs to eliminate the danger.

The thick growths of toxic mould in the Dima's home are certainly dangerous. And the family says only demolition of the house will solve the problem.

If that's true, the damages could cover the cost of tearing down the old home and building a new one.

So the question the Dimas have to answer is simple: Did the previous owner know about the mould?

In an e-mail to The Journal, the previous owner said she had been advised not to comment.

The Dimas however, have no doubt. They are convinced the incense smell was an effort to hide the problem long enough for the sale to be finalized.

"She knows the score," Norma Dima said.

Steve Dima acknowledged it was probably stupid not to have the property inspected.

But, as the half-restored cars and trucks parked neatly in the yard attest, Dima and his boys are good with their hands. He was convinced they could fix whatever problems he found.

He hopes that, by making his story public, others won't make the same mistake.

As for the woman who sold him the house, Dima can only shake his head.

"God says what goes around comes around. But I just don't know. ... We're ruined."

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