

Project Trapdoor 2009-07-30

INSPECTOR BRAD DESMARAIS, IN CHARGE OF GANGS AND DRUGS SECTION

Today we are going to talk about the efforts of the Vancouver Police Department to curb the proliferation of large commercial style marijuana grows, sometimes called "factory grows," in the city of Vancouver.

We are not talking about the classic "mom and pop" marijuana grow in a closet in the basement. We are talking about large, highly sophisticated grows that, in most cases, use the latest technology to boost the growing cycle as well as to keep the grow operation concealed from both the police and, more importantly from the grower's perspective, from organizations that exist almost solely to seal or "rip" grow operations. For the owners of these grows, it is all about creating an easy, untaxed, very lucrative income stream from the

production of marijuana. In short, it's all about money.

It is also important to understand that the commercial marijuana producer is not the sole participant in this industry. There are persons who run staging areas, sometimes referred to as transfer houses, and there are transportation managers and, finally, there are distributors. All of these folks take a piece of this very lucrative pie.

The illicit marijuana industry has evolved both technologically and organizationally over the past several years. Investigators now routinely find these types of grows in houses and other buildings, which are owned by offshore interests. Further investigation often reveals financial or

ownership linkages between several grow operations.

In some cases, criminal charges are indicated, however, in the vast majority of cases, the evidence gathered does not meet a criminal test. When this occurs, investigators often make referrals to the BC Civil Forfeiture Office, where the standard of evidence is based on civil test – a balance of probabilities. This avenue has proven to be a very effective tool.

In our opinion, the BC Civil Forfeiture Legislation is probably the most robust and effective civil forfeiture legislation in the country. Our goal is to remove the profit from these illicit commercial enterprises.

SERGEANT NEIL MUNRO, IN CHARGE OF GROWBUSTERS

Project Trapdoor began in August of 2008 and spanned several months. The project focused on two marijuana transfer houses – one in the 3200 block of Renfrew Street and another in the 4800 block of Knight Street.

The marijuana industry in British Columbia is highly organized and transfer houses are an integral part of the business. You can liken a transfer house to a grain elevator. Growers bring their product there to be graded.

They receive payment for it and arrangements are made to transport the product to the local, national and international markets.

As Project Trapdoor unfolded, the true size of the targeted operation became clearer. Initial observations had over 70 different vehicles attending to one of the target locations to drop off and pick up related materials. Many of these vehicles were already known to be associated to the illegal drug trade.

On April 2, 2009, search warrants were obtained for both of these transfer houses. On this day, investigators observed a man and a woman transferring bags of marijuana between the two residences. These bags were then loaded into vehicles for further distribution.

Our members stopped one of these vehicles and found American and Canadian currency, along with 24 lbs. of marijuana. Three men in the vehicle were arrested.

That same afternoon, the female associated to the Renfrew Street location was observed loading a black duffel bag and her two children aged 5 and 12 into her car.

After dropping the older child off at school, she drove to the 2700 block of E.16th Avenue, where she was arrested while passing the black duffel bag full of marijuana to another man. This took place while her five year old was waiting in the car a few feet away.

Both of these children and an older sibling were turned over to the care of the Ministry of Children and Family Development to ensure their safety.

Later that same day, a man drove up to the Renfrew Street location in a 2007 BMW X5 and was checked by police. He was found to be in possession of \$40,000 in US currency.

Project Trapdoor culminated in the following:

- The arrests of four people, who have been charged with various drug offences
- The seizure of almost 38 pounds of marijuana
- \$79,000 in Canadian currency
- \$40,000 US currency
- One 2004 Acura MDX
- One 2008 VW Jetta
- One residence in the 4800 block of Knight Street

The residence, cash and cars were seized pending asset forfeiture.

Marihuana Grow Operations - Vancouver City 2008 to 2009 (vtd)

