

Nova Scotia

Austrian family must leave Cape Breton home for at least a year



The Fuggers bought property in Richmond County in 2015 with the promise of easy immigration

Tom Ayers - CBC News - Posted: May 06, 2019 6:00 AM AT | Last Updated: 9 hours ago



Reinhard and Romana Fugger are shown with their two sons in their kitchen in Grand River, Richmond County. They have been ordered to leave Canada after their visas ran out. (Tom Ayers/CBC)

19 comments

A family from Austria has been ordered out of Canada, and must leave this week, after running afoul of immigration rules.

They hope to be back, but it'll be at least a year before they can return to Cape Breton, where they've sunk their life savings into a home and farm.

Reinhard and Romana Fugger have invested nearly \$500,000 after buying and improving a rural property in Grand River, Richmond County, in 2015.

They say a local man, Frank Eckhardt and his company F.E. Property Sales, facilitated the property purchase and promised easy immigration to Canada.

The Fuggers say that help never came.

"We find this property and we think we can do this in an easy way, because we have the information before that it is not hard, maybe easy, to immigrate here," said Reinhard Fugger.

Eckhardt's company website, hosted in Germany and aimed at Europeans, advertises property sales and "new settler consultation."



A map of the property purchased in 2015 by the Fugger family. (CBC)

The Fuggers say they found out after they got here that they paid more than the property was worth.

They paid \$160,000 to Eckhardt's lawyer for 4.5 hectares of land with a small summer cottage. The property value was assessed at \$82,000 at the time.

Real estate records show that most properties in the area sell for 1.5 times the assessed value, but the Fuggers paid 1.95 times the value.

The couple say they assumed that was because Eckhardt and his lawyer were being paid to help them with immigration.

Meanwhile, the Fuggers spent most of the first year digging a well, adding a stove and chimney, clearing the land and planting a garden.

Reinhard Fugger said the couple was so busy making their new place livable that their six-month visitor visas expired before they could apply for permanent residency.

Family served with removal order

When they turned to Eckhardt and his lawyer for help, they were referred to an immigration specialist in Halifax.

The Fuggers kept working on their property, bought another in nearby L'Ardoise, and had a second son, who is a Canadian citizen.

At the same time, they continued to try to apply for permanent residency on their own.

The Fuggers say they spent all their money on their property and couldn't afford an immigration lawyer or consultant.

She said the Fuggers are hard workers with progressive ideas about food security and connecting children with nature.

"They're really good people," MacPhee said.

"They have done a lot to create a life for themselves here. I'm not familiar with the details of the process and the order ... (but) I'm comfortable with them staying."

MacPhee said Cape Breton needs immigrants, especially ones like the Fuggers.

"They have a lot of skills and a lot of knowledge to share and I think that that certainly would be an additional asset for our community."



Immigration lawyer Lee Cohen says the Fuggers are in a bad situation, as owning property doesn't open any doors to immigration. (CBC)

Halifax immigration lawyer Lee Cohen said owning property doesn't open any doors to immigration, despite that widespread belief.

The Fuggers are in a terrible situation, he said.

Depending on the type of removal order, the Fuggers may have difficulty getting back into Canada, Cohen said.

Frank Eckhardt is a German immigrant who's lived in Cape Breton for 19 years.

He calls himself a property developer and runs his company out of an office in St. Peter's.

The Fuggers have emails and documents they say they got from Eckhardt implying that he was acting on their behalf in the land purchase, and they say he told them over the phone that immigration would be easy once they got here.



Frank Eckhardt said he only sells land he owns or has an interest, and is not a realtor or immigration consultant. (Facebook photo)

In an interview at his office, Eckhardt would not be recorded.

But he said he is neither a realtor nor a registered immigration consultant, despite his website offering property sales along with "new settler consultation."

Eckhardt said he only sells land he owns or maintains an interest, and is simply willing to tell people about his immigration experience if they ask.

He said settler consultations consist of offering suggestions about local services, such as who sells insurance in Cape Breton, or who drills wells or builds homes.

"If someone asks me, 'OK, the nice home over there, do you know the owner?' I can give them the phone number," Eckhardt said.

He said he got no money for helping the Fuggers buy their property.

The Fuggers said they have an email in which Eckhardt admits he expects a commission from the property seller.

But Eckhardt said he doesn't know anything about that.

Eckhardt said Richmond County, like all of Cape Breton, needs immigrants, and he is attracting them from Europe and helping maintain and create jobs in the area.

However, he said, people need to take personal responsibility for the rules and the process.

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AG Andrew Gilmour 1 hour ago Eckhardt isn't the only one in NS using this con. Being an immigrant himself could mean that if charged and convicted he could be deported himself.