



MEDIA RELEASE

Citing fire hazard to justify demolition, developers light fire inside St John's Church (1401 Comox) in West End

(Vancouver, Feb. 10, 2011) West End Neighbours (WEN) is calling for a public explanation for a mysterious fire set yesterday inside a vacant church at the center of a controversial proposal to demolish the 30-year old building and put up a 22-storey tower. (Photos, YouTube video of fire trucks, etc. www.WestEndNeighbours.ca.)

At about 3 pm yesterday, residents noticed suspicious activity at 1401 Comox St (St. John's United Church), jointly owned by property developer Westbank Projects Corp. and Peterson Investment Group. The church is threatened with imminent demolition despite pleas to Vancouver Mayor Gregor Robertson and City Council and to the owners to save the facility for the continued benefit of West End citizens. (A financing proposal to save the church was issued to the City last week, but WEN has not received any response.)

"I just find it ironic that Westbank, Peterson, and the architect, Henriquez, appear to have been involved in lighting a fire inside a building they say must be demolished because they are worried about a fire hazard," says WEN president Randy Helten. "I hope they will issue a public explanation to the authorities and local community about exactly what went on here. I also hope that the authorities will investigate immediately to ensure that the developer's activities complied with city various bylaws, fire and safety regulations, that the safety of neighbouring buildings has not been compromised, and that the relevant laws are being applied."

People were seen entering and leaving the building behind a screen erected in front of the entrance. Witnesses heard horns and chants coming from inside the former church, then saw an open fire through windows, and a large amount of smoke billowing out once doors opened. Also noted was the sound of breaking wood. Westbank employees were identified at the scene as was Gregory Henriquez, architect of this controversial proposal to rezone the site for a 400% increase in the currently-permitted density (floor space) on the site for a 22-storey tower. West End Neighbours currently has over 11,000 signatures on its petition calling for a halt on spot rezonings until a new comprehensive plan is in place for the West End.

Just before 5 pm, three Vancouver Fire Department trucks appeared on the scene, and a later call to the local fire station found that under no circumstances would an open fire be permitted within this building. It is believed that Westbank shut off the fire sprinkler system last summer and has left it disabled.

Follow-up news and questions:

- Did Westbank, Peterson, and Henriquez comply with all the relevant regulations in this incident?
- Early this morning, neighbours observed doors left open overnight and no security guard present. This morning (Feb. 10) at 8 am, a car was seen racing away with items apparently stolen from the church.
- If initial demolition was being conducted inside, did the owners have a proper demolition permit? Were they complying with the required WorkSafe BC regulations?
- Did the owners have approval of their insurer to light a fire inside the church?
- What was the nature of the ceremony, and was it culturally sensitive and respectful of the origins and history of the church?

West End Neighbours (WEN) is a network of thousands of residents calling for a new comprehensive plan to ensure the future livability of the West End and a halt to spot rezonings.

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