

## Statement



# West End Neighbours (WEN) counters developers' misinformation and spin on rezoning hotspots

Vancouver, October 28, 2010

There has been a great deal of media coverage about West End Neighbours (WEN) and the opposition to the recently proposed rezonings in their neighbourhood. It has sparked a controversy fueled by numerous attempts to discredit and dismiss West End residents who are against major rezonings that allow large development projects in the absence of a comprehensive plan. WEN would like to set the record straight with our views on several of these issues.

### **A. Renters and owners are united in their concern for the West End**

A false claim that keeps surfacing is that opposition to the proposed developments is driven by owners and that renters have not had a voice in this debate.

For the record, over 11,000 West Enders have signed a petition calling for a stop to rezonings without a comprehensive plan. The majority of people signing this petition are renters, not owners. In the absence of a comprehensive plan, West End Neighbours (WEN) has asked the City of Vancouver to adhere to the existing Council-adopted zoning and development guidelines that have served the West End so well for more than 20 years.

The petition results have been substantiated by the City's report on *West End Discussion on Community Needs and Affordable Housing* prepared after neighbourhood consultation sessions and a survey involving both owners and renters and published June 2010. Based on the findings, West End residents value the character of their neighbourhood and believe the recent development proposals are inconsistent with this character. Moreover they are concerned that the Short Term Incentives for Rental Program (STIR) will not address the affordability challenges faced by many renters and that there should not be further site specific rezonings until there is a comprehensive community plan.

The West End Residents Association's *West End Community Visioning Forum* report published March 2010 several key themes important to participants such as affordability, walkability, natural environment, community character, diversity, safety, and local amenities" Residents were also concerned about increasing density through expensive residential towers and requested a moratorium on development until there is a West End plan.

The messages from the community are loud and clear.

West Enders know what they are signing on the petition. Opposition to rezonings is not because they do not understand the issues, as some suggest, nor is it simply a communications or public relations problem. The core issue is a fundamental difference of opinion about the substance and approach to development proposed by certain City staff, developers and members of the current City Council.

### **B. West End residents do not oppose development**

The West End currently has a comprehensive planning framework developed through extensive community consultation in the late 1980s. When this framework of zoning and development guidelines was put in place, it ended the ad hoc pattern of high-rise towers and established guidelines for creating livable spaces for residents.

Despite curbing high-rise development at that time, the West End still has the highest density of any neighbourhood in the city, with 141.9 dwellings per hectare. The next closest is Downtown at 66.7, most neighbourhoods are much lower at about 10 to 20, and Vancouver's average at 22.1 as reported in the *City of Vancouver Statistics Census Data 2006*. The mix of housing types and the emphasis on green spaces in past development patterns have created a community cherished by its residents, and considered by many

urban planners as a successful model of livability.

Significant development potential exists within the current zoning and development guideline framework for the West End. In other words, the community could still accommodate the construction of many more dwelling units WITHOUT the need for rezoning.

West End residents are not opposed to new development – rather West End residents are opposed to rushed, unbridled, ad hoc rezonings for massive structures that:

- Over-ride existing development guidelines
- Omit or dismiss meaningful community consultation
- Disregard concerns of affordability for vulnerable residents
- Ignore the limited capacity of existing community services and place an additional load on remaining capacity (e.g. schools, community facilities and libraries)
- Destroy valuable heritage sites and replace them with mere facades
- Decrease green space and sunlight for nearby residents
- Impact views for many blocks in the surrounding area
- Impinge on privacy of existing residents
- Increase traffic congestion and noise
- Ignore the value placed on our landmarks
- Displace important businesses
- Damage the character and livability of our neighbourhood

The community has requested a halt to rezonings for tower projects until existing zoning and development guidelines have been updated and/or replaced with a new comprehensive community plan.

### **C. The West End has had substantial development in the last two decades**

Some councilors and members of the development community claim that the West End has not seen substantial development in decades and that West End residents are not able to accept change. But this is not the case.

Our research has found that since 1987, over 5,500 dwelling units in 100 buildings have been built in the West End (defined as the area covered by the Mayor's West End Community Advisory Committee). Developments include a mix of high-rise and low-rise apartment developments, as well as small townhouse projects – examples include the Alvar, Andaluca, Wesley Place, SeaStar, Mole Hill redevelopment and many others.

The creation of these units has resulted in additional rental accommodation, either purpose-built as rentals (such as at Mole Hill) or through the private rental of condominiums. According to the *Vancouver Condominium Rental Study* prepared for the City and published December 2009, an estimated 60% of the private condominium units in the West End are owner occupied and the remaining 40% are investment properties available for rent. While it is not known how many of the investment properties are empty, it is expected that the vast majority are occupied by renters.

Overall, development in the West End over the past 20 years has increased density in one of Vancouver's densest neighbourhoods and none of this growth has resulted in the backlash experienced today. The West End is not "development shy." Rather, it is savvy enough to identify and oppose development that does not contribute to the livability of the community.

### **D. The community IS informed**

In the *West Ender*, Ian Gillespie, CEO of Westbank Projects Corp. and the current owner (along with Ben Yeung of Peterson Group) of the St. John's Church site at 1401 Comox Street, suggests that the "great deal of misinformation among residents in the West End has created a sense of panic about development" and "we've let people who want to make something out of this, for whatever their own reasons are, get out there and put out the wrong information." This is untrue.

In response to the sudden and dramatic rezoning applications, a self-organizing citizens' movement was born in November 2009. It has grown steadily. In April 2010, this group of volunteers adopted the name West End Neighbours. It has been engaged in an active awareness-raising program in the community.

#### West End Neighbours:

- Hold information and education forums and post the outcomes on the WEN website
- Support the West End Residents Association to hold information sessions and encourage residents to attend
- Encouraged the City to hold information sessions and maintain a website related to these issues
- Hold weekly sessions on the street, discussing development issues with West End residents as part of petition gathering
- Attend meetings and events ranging from City Council and Urban Design Panel meetings to meetings with various community groups and local associations
- Regularly discuss relevant issues with the media and post all related articles on the website so the whole community can see the outcomes
- Maintain an active Internet presence with a website, as well as Facebook and Twitter accounts, providing up-to-date news of ongoing developments
- Distribute regular email bulletins to thousands of residents who have signed the WEN mailing list
- Distribute information to West End residential buildings about upcoming events and issues
- Encourage the City to increase their community outreach for any upcoming development proposals
- Distribute flyers to inform residents about upcoming community open houses and suggest relevant questions to ask in these meetings

In contrast, the proponents of rezoning for the 22-storey tower at 1401 Comox Street have provided only the minimum information required by the City (yellow rezoning sign and two open houses), but no other outreach to affected neighbours. In addition, through the public relations firm Pottinger & Associates Ltd., they held a private meeting for members of one of the two groups they hand-picked to receive free space (if the project goes ahead) to discuss how participants could help “secure a brand new neighbouring facility” at the church site by essentially lobbying the City council to approve the rezoning.

The printed materials prepared for and distributed by these two organizations, as well as the text on a large sign recently displayed on the church lawn (in violation of City sign bylaws) has the same misleading information the developers continue to put out to the media and other venues. This appears to be part of an ongoing attempt to undermine efforts of West End groups trying to find viable solutions to the problems associated with the STIR program and development pressures.

Here are examples of the misleading or concerning information:

- In the *West Ender*, Ian Gillespie says “the height [of 22 storeys for the proposed Comox tower] is comparable to others in the area.” In fact, this developer has asked for a massive increase in density, almost five times the floor area permitted under current zoning. And a quick walk in this neighborhood shows that almost all except one nearby building would be dwarfed this proposed tower. Most existing buildings in the vicinity (3 to 7 storeys in height) would be denied sunlight, views, and privacy and the proposed building’s streetscape would be completely at odds with the character of the surrounding neighborhood.
- Information on the developer’s promotional cards prepared for members of Qmunity and Gordon Neighborhood House, slated to receive free space if the rezoning is approved, states that the “site is presently zoned for a 190 ft residential building.” This is incorrect. The site is zoned RM5 which allows an outright height of 18.3 metres, equivalent to 60 feet (4).
- Permitted height can only be increased with the discretion of the City’s Director of Planning or Development Permit Board, and then, only when certain criteria have been met (livability and environmental quality of the surrounding neighbourhood is not unduly harmed, and consideration is given to (a) all applicable policies and guidelines adopted by Council, (b) the submission of any advisory group, property owner or tenant, and (c) the effects on public and private views, sunshine, privacy and open space.” *RM-5 Zoning Schedule, Section 4.3.1*).
- St. John’s church has 13,000 square feet of indoor space previously used by a variety of groups in the community for a wide range of events. Plus there is a popular outdoor garden. By comparison, the developer has offered 4,000 square feet that two organizations will share. This represents a significant loss of a valued community amenity that is already limited in the West End.
- Similar to other projects, the community may lose a hundred year old heritage site with only a few elements from St. Johns church incorporated into a massive glass, steel and concrete tower. This is another example of how current policies are eroding all but some small fragments of our history.
- And a nagging question remains. Why is it considered more sustainable to tear down existing buildings and replace them with large steel, concrete and glass structures than to upgrade and maintain existing buildings. Green is about recycling and not wasting and this approach to

development appears to ignore these basic principles.

The residents who “want to make something out of this” are doing their sincere best to raise awareness of the facts about the proposed developments in their community and to protect the livability and character of their neighbourhood and home.

#### **E. STIR is costly to taxpayers and beneficial to the developer**

In addition to the substantial profits for the architect and developers, the rental units created under the STIR program are not be “cost-neutral” to the City. These subsidies in the form of significant waivers and incentives under the STIR program could end up over-loading existing community facilities, deny the City the revenues that would normally help pay for needed improvements to these facilities, and in the process, damage livability and transfer costs to other taxpayers.

City Councillors have said the City does not have the funds to subsidize truly “affordable” rental units. But how can the city justify giving away millions of dollars in potential revenues that would pay for public amenities, in exchange for privately-owned rental units that will rent at the highest price the market will bear?

Note: There are about ten major rezoning projects proposed or anticipated in the West End at the moment, Only a few of the projects are under the STIR program.

#### **F. Delaying the Comox Street development will not have a major impact on the overall West End housing situation**

In the *West Ender*, Ian Gillespie notes he is “willing to be patient with the community” but he cautions that “residents also need to realize delaying the Comox tower will contribute to the West End’s rental-housing crisis.”

This “warning” does not have a basis in fact.

Since 2008 when the City identified a rental shortage and tried to find an affordable rental housing solution, the vacancy rates have more than quadrupled from 0.4% to 2.1% (in 2009).

It is misleading to suggest that delaying the construction of the 193 dwelling units that would comprise a 0.8% increase in rental units in the West End will have a perceptible impact on the overall rental housing situation. In the same *West Ender* article, even Sharon Isaak of the “Renters at Risk” advocacy group acknowledges that rents “will not come down as a result of one purpose-built rental building.”

These expensive market-priced rental units will not address the real challenges facing seniors and lower income renters here. The developer’s estimates for the Bidwell and Davie project show that rents for a 390 sq ft suite will be \$1,050 per month. While the small size of these suites gives an illusion of affordability, the price per square foot surpasses many apartment rentals rates in the City.

And will a small increase in rental supply make a significant impact on rental affordability? Highly doubtful and there appears to be little, if any, evidence to support this position.

Plus there are potential downsides ignored in the debate. There may be an actual loss in affordability for the residents. It is possible the new expensive rental units may inflate rental costs in the West End. Recent changes in provincial legislation allow building owners to apply for rent increases to bring their rates in line with surrounding buildings and this could mean existing buildings will attempt to “price-match” newly-created units. Moreover, there could be increases in local land prices if spot rezonings like the one proposed for 1401 Comox allow such dramatic increases in height and density.

#### **G. The STIR program will not make Vancouver a more equitable city**

In the *West Ender*, Gregory Henriquez, the architect of the two controversial West End projects, has stated that the window of opportunity for creating new market-priced rental units is time-sensitive and that a better communication strategy is urgently needed to get people on board. And if and when they do, Vancouver has the potential to be a world leader in creating a more equitable city.

It is not surprising that an architect would see the issue as “time-sensitive” since the longer the project takes, the greater the costs to the client. Obviously, the architect for the STIR projects at both Bidwell & Davie and

1401 Comox Street is not an objective observer in this situation since he stands to gain handsomely from these projects, regardless of their impacts on the neighbourhood or their role in affecting equitability in the city.

#### **H. WEN believes there is a need for more community consultation**

There is an urgent need for meaningful consultation between the community and the City of Vancouver to establish a future for the West End – a future that truly takes into account the needs and objectives of residents. We hope that the recent debate over the proposed STIR projects and several other major rezoning applications we are watching in the West End will mark the beginning of this consultation and a change in approach.

This situation is more than just a communications issue – the City must come to the table to consider more options and innovative solutions. WEN challenges our elected officials, our City staff, and the entire development community to think outside this kind of architectural box, to innovate, and to admit that they do not (yet!) have all the answers. WEN looks forward to participating with the City in finding these solutions and to working toward a positive future for the West End.

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*Disclaimer:* We are a citizen-based volunteer organization. We are committed to finding and presenting accurate facts on key issues of importance in our community. We have worked to ensure the accuracy of every statement in this document. We welcome your comments, corrections, and additional information to ensure we are meeting a high standard of accuracy.

*West End Neighbours (WEN) is a network of residents that has grown to thousands of West End residents concerned about the impact of “spot” rezonings on livability in the West End and the implications for all of Vancouver.*

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