

Strathcona library proposal sparks furore

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VANCOUVER - Usually, neighbourhoods are happy to get a new library. But a proposal to build a \$14.5-million library at Hastings and Heatley has some Strathcona residents outraged because it would involve tearing down historic buildings in the city's oldest neighbourhood.

The main bone of contention is the Heatley Block, a two-storey commercial building that has four commercial spaces on the main floor and a rooming house above. Built in 1930, it is the only "character" building left on a fairly bleak strip of Hastings.

"The City of Vancouver went out real estate shopping for a site for the new public library, and they just happened to buy the best building on that part of Hastings," says John Atkin of the Strathcona Residents Association.

"Here we have a building that has people living in it, and retail on the ground floor, viable stores, and we're going to wipe it out.

"It just seems [dumb] to have purchased the best building on Hastings street architecturally and you're going to blow it up. I don't care what the amenity is that we're getting out of it, it just seems wrong."

The Heatley Block isn't on the city's official heritage register, which was compiled in 1985 and is about to be upgraded. Neither are two old houses on the same site which date to 1889 and 1898. The 1889 structure is probably one of the 10 oldest houses in Vancouver.

Strathcona resident Claudine Michaud says the Heatley Block and the old houses have heritage merit, whether they're on the official list or not. She sees it as a Strathcona version of the Black Swan building in Kitsilano, another handsome old building with no heritage status that was recently demolished.

"[The Heatley Block is] one of the last buildings of its kind in the city," said Michaud. "It's a very handsome building."

Atkin fears that if the Heatley Block is torn down, it would help cement a commercial dead zone on Hastings, where there are several social housing buildings in the adjacent two blocks.

"If our other stated aim is to revitalize Hastings Street, we've done a pretty lousy job of it," he said.

"We've allowed all these social services agencies to go in, and allowed them to escape the requirement for retail.

"There may not be any retail that wants to go on Hastings Street right away, but 10 years from now, as the condo boom keeps moving, we're going to see people wanting to do retail on Hastings and there won't be any space."



CREDIT: Steve Bosch/Vancouver Sun
Claudine Michaud puts up a poster about development plans for the historic "Heatley Block" on East Hastings in Strathcona. The buildings in question are in background.

The city's real estate department purchased the three lots on the Heatley block site for \$1.8 million on June 15. It is also looking to buy an old welfare office next door to make a bigger library. The office is now co-owned and occupied by the Pivot Legal Society, an advocacy group that bought it for \$850,000 two years ago. The proposed library could be up to 16,000 square feet, up from 1,500 square feet at the current Strathcona library.

Paul Whitney of the Vancouver Public Library said the city and library had several meetings with neighbourhood residents about the need for a new library.

"Since the early 1990s, a full service library branch that serves both the Downtown Eastside and Strathcona communities, and Chinatown, has been a top capital priority for the library board, and we've never been able to realize it," said Whitney.

"We did consultations in 2003 and 2004 and the message we got was that the only way we could do a full-service branch for the disparate communities was to have it on the south side of Hastings Street. People were really clear that it had be on the south side. And they wanted it to be reasonably close to the school as possible."

The Heatley Block met the criteria, so the city snapped it up.

But Michaud feels there may be other factors involved. She said zoning allows for an eight-storey building on the Heatley Block site, and thinks the city wants to build housing on top of the library, as it is doing at the new Mount Pleasant Community Centre at Kingsway and Main. The Heatley Block Preservation Society has plastered Strathcona with posters showing how high the new structure could be.

"We're concerned that they're going to take full advantage of the zoning on this block to build the full height, in exchange for having a developer pay for the cost of purchasing the land and perhaps building the library," said Michaud.

"We're also wondering why they didn't take the opportunity to buy other buildings that are for sale on the next block over, between Heatley and Hawks. These buildings were built in the 1960s or '70s, they're single storey, they have no historical value. Why didn't the city snap those up? The only difference is that that block is only zoned for four storeys."

Atkin said one solution would be to use a brick building on the Strathcona school site at Pender and Heatley for the library.

But Whitney said the problem with the school building is that it would be "next to impossible to effectively serve the Downtown Eastside community from that facility."

Michaud and area residents will be meeting with the city and library July 29 to discuss the issue.

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