

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION MEETING COMMENTS

3.2 PUBLIC PARTICIPATION MEETING – Vacant Buildings By-law Review

- J. Thompson, Life Spin - As many of you know Life Spin has been an advocacy organization in London for over thirty years, and last year we served more than eight thousand low income families. The bylaw revisions, we're hoping will support these families, all of them, to live with some equity. We commend the City of London staff and council for the action to enact vacant property by-law changes, particularly the need to provide floor plans for first responders, the restriction on the length of vacancy allowed and the addition of fines in the subsequent proposed changes to By-law 54. However, we believe that the changes in the by-laws will not make any real change without strict enforcement. We started to map some of the vacant properties that folks have been drawing to our attention and I've included a map there in our report. One of the things that we noticed about the map is that a lot of the properties that are vacant and boarded up inappropriately are owned by land speculators and developers, and they're setting their own standards of disrepair and decay. We believe that the Municipal Act gives you the tools to enforce the standards and to immediately make the repairs that are necessary. There is dangerous and hazardous conditions for the residents, the neighbours and the first responders. The fines are a wonderful addition and it's nice that they can be in there. I do have a question about them being doubled, because I think that's a wonderful tool was mentioned previously. Fines often bring action. They can be doubled, so the first fine is four hundred dollars, that's doubled to eight hundred the next time it's not been repaired or fixed up, will it double to sixteen hundred dollars? That's a clarification I think will give you even more power if you can keep doubling fines until the landowners do the work they are supposed to be doing. We believe that if you go in immediately and start to make the repairs if they're not fixed, that gets you a proactive way to address the judgment to the neighbourhood, the health and safety risks to the first responders and other residents in the area. The cost to make the repairs are recoverable from the offending property owners under the Municipal Act, and in addition to the proactive enforcement we're asking that council consider an affordable housing strategy that aligns building acquisition with both the standards and the enforcement. For example, the city of Chicago has an initiative, they call it the Troubled Building Initiative, and it's a tool that they used to help reclaim troubled and abandoned buildings to prevent these buildings from deteriorating into a state of disrepair which may lead to displacement, the loss of affordable housing and unnecessary demolition, so there are examples out there. We've included some links for you to find a way to that and how that becomes part of a broader strategy for the whole community. As a community we need to regain control of all the physical factors blighting the lives of poor residents, abandon properties may be the single most destructive because they attract so many other conditions making other challenges become even worse. So what's left at the end of the process is those struggling to make it on low incomes remain in their neighborhoods only by doubling up, by living in substandard housing and by paying a high percentage of their meagre incomes for housing. We believe that London needs a strategy that prioritizes vacant properties, getting control of them and taking them from irresponsible landowners. In order for this strategy to work, bringing properties into compliance, imposing tax liens for not maintaining the by-law standards, should be implemented immediately, and all vacant lots and abandoned buildings. We respectfully request that council direct staff to pursue the implementation of an affordable housing strategy that incorporates building acquisition as part of a response to vacant property by-law enforcement protocol. And that's me, thank you very much.

- M. Hendry - My name is Matthew Hendry, I live in ward seven, and I'd like to contribute a few points to this discussion on vacated housing and vacant buildings, which I hope will clarify the picture for a lot of people. I'd like to also thank Ms. Thompson for her remarks as part of this discussion and I'd like to offer a sincere apology. Earlier this summer, as part of a special project for Life Spin, I made a poster depicting a now burned down building on King Street. The building that was pictured was 689 King Street. It caught fire in December and, at the time that I wrote the report, I hesitated to forward it to people on city council and I hesitated to forward it to the City of London because I feared that it would cause trouble. I now realize that my failure to forward the report to people within the City of London has created even more heartache and had the potential to create even more trouble than having forwarded it. To those hurt by this inaction, I can only offer my sincerest apologies and the promise to do better. That said, I wonder if there is not a larger error. The failure to recognize a clear avenue to improve the situation of living, improve safety, spur financial revenue and refurbish many neighbourhoods in order to create a better tomorrow for the City of London. As someone who has attended school and worked in several of the neighbourhoods within London, I have often wondered if the appearance of a neighbourhood impacts life decisions, and after all this time I can say yes. It affects both your outlook on life, your mental health and your physical well being. The vacated buildings in our city give off a rundown look, and this scares many people away from, not only the neighbourhood, yet also from opportunities. One personal example I can think of, right off the bat, would be St. John ambulance, which is located almost right in the heart of Old East Village. Those who have been involved with this organization as volunteers and members know that the organization does amazing work however St. John Ambulance has struggled to gain new volunteers and members, especially for their youth programs. You look at the surrounding neighbourhood, the frequent transit inactivity, the lack of street lighting, and it's easy to figure out why. No parent in their right mind is going to let a second year high school student take a city bus into a neighbourhood full of rundown buildings to volunteer for an organization, no matter how great that organization is and no parent has the time to repeatedly drive their kids halfway across the city just for peace of mind in respect to safety. Another example I have is out in Lambeth where the city has allowed the Baker family farm to sit. For those of you who haven't put two and two together to complete the picture, one of the most recent would have been owners of this farm was Frank Baker. He was a member of our Lion's Club and passed away a little over two years ago. The city had yet, and still has yet to do anything with respect to this property, which is perfectly visible from the north side of Wharnccliffe Road South and Main Street as you head into Lambeth. I've got plenty of solutions in the report I wrote for Life Spin on this and am happy to email all of you a copy of the report. As a show of faith, I ask that all of you take the ten minutes to read the research that I've put into this issue. As an added step, I'd ask everyone in the city to think about what we can do to give you more opportunity and all of these issues addressed, including this one. An excellent start would be immediately improving the lighting, transportation amenities and housing conditions in our neighbourhoods so that parents actually feel safe allowing children to bus into these areas. A second suggestion we would make would be to look into what additional efforts the city can take to ensure that kids enrolled in activities in any of our neighbourhoods are not having to look over their shoulder every five seconds. Thank you.