

Citizens need a board to stand between them and city hall

Barbara Yaffe



I defy you to find five ordinary Vancouverites who can tell you what members of this city's board of variance do, and why the rest of us should be in a panic that they were fired last week.

A year ago I'd have been among the uninformed. Today, I understand the board's boundless value, despite the fact that my personal experience with it was entirely negative.

Bear with my story and you'll get a handle on what the board's firing demonstrates about the disaster taking place in our city's governance.

My block, in Dunbar, is a leafy oasis of modest character homes on lots measuring 33, 44 and 50 feet. Neighbours take enormous pride in the area. Their gardens are extravaganzas of greenery.

Two years ago, a developer purchased a lot on the corner, measuring a few inches greater than 50 feet. Because of those few inches, the lot was designated "an orphan" by the city and prey to subdivision whims.

Presto — two 26-foot lots topped by two big-ticket, discordantly tall, narrow houses.

I led the armada of protest. The block soon learned Vancouver grants such subdivisions without consulting neighbours who clearly are stakeholders as much as the developer is. We don't like it? Go to court, the city haughtily advised.

Second, if you don't favour the proposed house design, appeal the development permit to the board of variance. We did, and lost. But at least we had some avenue of appeal that was independent from overbearing city bureaucrats.

In coming before the panel of five ordinary citizens late on a week night in a barren third-floor meeting room at city hall, I came to understand that this was my block's lone, affordable shot at appealing to some fair-minded people in a bid to save the character of our sacred little street.

During the lengthy variance hearing, the city bureaucrat who granted the development permit for the discordant houses defended his decision with unremitting aggression. He simply outtalked us. That we lost, however, did not diminish the value of the board.

It and it alone stands between on the one side — Mr. High Density himself, Sam Sullivan, and a city hall in a pro-development frenzy — and on the other, the Vancouver residents who wish to preserve a bit of the character that has made Vancouver as livable as it is today.

Make no mistake. We're in the midst of a building boom and thus at a crossroads. If, in the face of the roar of development, we fail to protect what makes this city livable, Vancouver's character will be lost forever.

Many believe our downtown is a success and retiring planning director Larry Beasley was a hero. I see it as an overdensified jumble of architecturally mundane edifices, a crowded mass of concrete towers.

Highly paid bureaucrats at city hall are running the show, operating like an army of steamrollers and bulldozers.

They obviously don't like it when board of variance members overturn their decisions. It's messy, creates development delays and results in potentially costly lawsuits from developers.

(Democracy can be messy and expensive.)

Last Thursday, in a closed meeting, NPA politicians supported by bullying bureaucrats solved the problem by firing the members — who, by the way, volunteer their time.

This is nothing short of an assault on civic democracy. There's no one left now to safeguard concerns of the little folks, be they residents of East Hastings or Angus Drive.

Anyone who comes forward to fill these newly vacant variance positions should be aware that the main qualification is a willingness to be a servant of the city, a lackey.

In fact, proper rules of governance make it absurd for the city to appoint a single one of those board members.

Members must be at arm's length if the variance board is to have a scintilla of credibility. The alternative is for the city to abolish the concept of having a variance board.

In that scenario at least, Sullivan and his gang would be acknowledging city hall is an autocracy run by bureaucrats who are uninterested in opposing perspectives or citizen input.

Heaven help Vancouver.

byaffe@png.canwest.com