

For Immediate Release

Hospice Faces Closure if Council Approves Rezoning at June 11 Public Hearing
Supporters Warn of Devastating Impact of 'Development at any Cost'

The threat of hospice closure is very real.

If Council gives the green light for a developer to build a 4-storey market rental townhouse development directly next to Vancouver Hospice, the result will be devastating for Vancouver residents who require specialized palliative care during their final weeks of life, and families who need bereavement support.

The proposal calls for the rezoning of a 17,502 sq. ft. property that is sandwiched between the hospice and a single family home on the southeast corner of Connaught Drive. If rezoned, the 2-storey house will increase to 4 storeys, and a single family home will become 21 units with a 32-spot underground parking lot. The construction phase of the new development, with an anticipated two-year duration, will likely lead to a complete closure of the hospice. This would force patients to rely on emergency services and acute care admissions at local hospitals, and experienced dedicated staff to seek employment elsewhere.

“I am seriously concerned about the immediate impact of the construction on our ability to provide hospice care to our patients and loved ones,” says VHS Medical Director Dr. Catriona Aparicio. “We have a very high occupancy rate, and if we are forced to close, this will significantly impact the provision of hospice care in Vancouver.”

Vancouver Hospice closure will result in the loss of nearly 25% of hospice beds in Vancouver, impacting over 150 individuals who go there each year to die. This will also jeopardize a range of well-established bereavement programs that support hundreds of individuals and families across the city who struggle with the loss of their loved ones.

One of these family members is Lilliana Merler, whose husband died at the hospice two years ago. “The care offered is uniquely designed for those who are dying, and their families,” she says. “It is absolutely necessary for the dying to be afforded specialized care, peaceful surroundings and dignity during their last days. This hospice must be left alone to stand as it is,” she adds, “without disruption.”

Apart from the threat of closure, ongoing disruptions would include obstruction of the currently peaceful view for patients and families from the entire north side of the hospice: the only common area with a view of trees and sky.

There would also be a dramatic increase in traffic along the narrow one-car lane; the only vehicle access for hearses, ambulances, service vehicles, and families coming to the hospice.

Most distressing, however, is the transport of bodies from the back lane – a profoundly private and emotional experience for loved ones saying their final goodbyes - will be exposed to additional onlookers from townhouse vehicles, windows and balconies.

Maria Totsikas – whose mother spent the last four months of her life at Vancouver Hospice – says she was grateful for the unique privacy the back of the hospice provided.

“This is where I was last with my mom,” she says. “As the funeral home came to take her, this was an intensely private and sensitive time for my family. Had I looked to my right and saw someone in their living room or balcony looking down on me at that very moment, it would have been even more devastating. If this application is approved I fear for the future of the hospice and how this could affect the citizens of Vancouver seeking end of life care. I understand the need for housing in Vancouver,” she adds, “but at what cost?”

Vancouver Hospice Society (VHS) Executive Director Simin Tabrizi says they have been struggling to make their case heard since they first learned of the rezoning application a year-and-a-half ago. “With our very limited resources, we have been trying to inform the public about this extremely important issue that will directly affect Vancouver residents who are in need of quality end-of-life care,” she says.

During the course of meetings with City Planning staff, Tabrizi says they were shocked and discouraged to learn that the process is biased toward developers from the outset. “The City Planners seem to be biased towards developers,” she says, “and don’t seem to be guided by any community or social concerns.”

Prior to rezoning applications going to Public Hearing, City Planning staff prepare what should be a fair and balanced report to Council. This report is the primary document the elected City Council relies on to inform the public about the pros and cons of the proposal.

“The public consultation process is a farce,” adds Tabrizi. “The City Planners have told us that they are directed to work closely with the developer and architects before their rezoning application is submitted to ensure their application would be approved. In fact, they said they never recommend rejection of a development proposal. This process is clearly skewed in favour of the developer from the outset,” she adds, “and seems to make a mockery of the public consultation process. We were not even approached by City Planners until well after the application was accepted.”

To make matters worse, the report from the General Manager of Planning to the Council - which (as expected) recommends approval of the application - contains inaccuracies and seriously misleading omissions; all of which clearly benefit the applicant. “It is at best negligent, and at worst dishonest,” says VHS Board Chair Stephen Roberts. “How can Council be expected to make an informed decision based on such an inaccurate and incomplete view of the facts?”

The proposal was submitted under the Interim Rezoning Policy for Affordable Housing Choices. One of the basic requirements of the policy is that proposals *must demonstrate a degree of public support*. Tabrizi says that, among other inaccuracies, the report clearly attempts to minimize opposition to the proposed development in order to meet this basic requirement. For example, the number of hard copy petition signatures that was listed in the report was substantially lower than the actual figures the hospice collected (less than 7% of the total), and the online signatures collected (almost 6,000) was not included at all.

She says that other vital information was completely omitted. “In preparing our opposition to this application we were invited to meet with the Seniors Advisory Committee of the City of Vancouver,” says Tabrizi. “We also met with the City’s Social Planning staff. The Seniors Advisory Committee stated that they are not in support of this rezoning application, and the City’s Social Planning

Department expressly stated that they will recommend rejection of this proposal. Neither of these important facts were included in the report."

"This rezoning application is a public interest issue," says Tabrizi. "Not only should the public expect that special social and community consideration be applied to this case, but they should also expect adherence to a fair and unbiased development application process at City Hall."

She adds, "It is Council's job to balance the interest of developers with the needs of Vancouver residents. The citizens of Vancouver have the right to access a peaceful death in hospice. We are fighting to ensure that this right is acknowledged and protected."

Hospice reps will request to speak at the Public Hearing on June 11, 2019, and a large group of hospice supporters will be at City Hall in protest starting at 5:30 pm.

Vancouver Hospice Society is comprised of a team of dedicated healthcare professionals, staff and volunteers who work together to provide compassionate end-of-life and bereavement care for individuals and their families in Vancouver. In addition to offering quality end-of-life care at their 8-bed residential hospice at 4615 Granville St, they provide a range of support services to palliative individuals and their families within the Vancouver community. The society also operates 2 volunteer-run thrift shops in Kerrisdale and Kitsilano, which raise money to support hospice programs and services for residents of Vancouver. For more info: <https://www.vancouverhospice.org/>

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