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September 21, 2011

Mayor Gregor Robertson and Vancouver City Council
Vancouver City Hall
453 W. 12th Ave.
Vancouver, BC, V5Y 1V4

Mayor Robertson and City Council Members;

Re: 502 Alexander Street (Atira Women's Resource Society)

On behalf of Heritage Vancouver, I am writing to express our urgent concerns about the danger of demolition of this heritage house, built around 1888 and considered to be the second oldest surviving house in the City of Vancouver.

Overall, we are impressed by the Atira Women's Resource Society's project for the site that aims to achieve two of the City of Vancouver's goals, namely to create social housing for vulnerable young women and to save a heritage building, by renovating it to accommodate new housing. This also represents an all too rare improvement to this struggling area of Strathcona, located north of Hastings, which has not benefited from the ongoing public and private sector investments seen in the Strathcona neighbourhood south of Hastings.

The attractive 1912 brick building at the corner of Alexander Street and Jackson Avenue that is being retained is a significant structure and an important part of the character of this block. Regrettably, the fate of the small wood-frame house next door at 502 Alexander is much less secure. When the addition was removed, to make space for more housing units at the rear (south side) of the site, the original house was found to be structurally unstable due to the removal of support walls. Atira has stated that it did not budget for the extra cost for the structural repairs. It is therefore proposing to essentially demolish the 1888 house.

The structural issue would, however, appear to be a non-issue. Wood-frame houses of this type are extremely easy to upgrade, using construction techniques that are common and inexpensive such as frame walls and plywood. Interestingly, several people have already volunteered to help with this work since the issue surfaced in the media. The original budget for this project would have included the cost to restore windows, doors, exterior and interior finishes, insulation etc. Therefore any extra funding would only be needed to cover the structural reinforcing of the exterior wall. As it appears there are community resources that could help achieve this, the house can feasibly be saved.

This house is significant for a number of compelling reasons; first, its age, and the rarity of any buildings that survive from this very earliest time in Vancouver's history. Secondly, this neighbourhood was part of Vancouver's earliest development and its historic building stock illustrates our early connection to the railway, the port and the first momentum of settlement. Thirdly, it is connected to an important early settler, John Baptist Henderson, who built the house in 1888. Henderson, who was born in Ireland in 1849, was a true pioneer adventurer who changed jobs and homesteads numerous times during his career, J.B. Henderson came from a practical background, and used a wide variety of skills related to carpentry, contracting and design, to survive on the frontier. After pursuing an architectural career in many communities throughout western Canada, Henderson settled in Vancouver again where he died in 1931. His life, and his connection to this very early Vancouver house, typifies the pioneering spirit of those who first settled our city.

We are on record as stating that it would be a truly unfortunate irony if the second oldest house in the city were torn down, while the City of Vancouver is celebrating its 125th birthday. "Our earliest buildings are the story of Vancouver being carved out of the wilderness. This house dates from the time when the train was just arriving and the city was growing – there was nothing here when this house was built."

We feel strongly that this significant early structure can be retained, as originally planned, without any difficulties to Atira or its worthwhile project.

Thank you in advance for your attention to resolving the threat to this important symbol of Vancouver's early history.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "don luxton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish at the end.

Donald Luxton, President
Heritage Vancouver

Cc. Penny Ballem, City Manager
Marco D'Agostini, Senior Planner, Heritage Group
Brent Toderian, Director of Planning
Members of the Heritage Commission