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Councillor_WongTam@toronto.ca

February 10, 2020

Planning and Housing Committee
City Hall, Committee Room 1
100 Queen Street West
Toronto ON M5H 2N2

Dear Chair and Council Members,

Re: Strengthening Security Policies for Vacant Buildings

Over the past two years, Ward 13 has seen three incidents of fire causing serious damage to heritage buildings. Two of these incidents, at 85 Shuter Street and 189 Mutual Street, respectively, resulted in critical injuries to firefighters, due to the age and instability of the buildings involved. The third incident nearly devastated Sheard Mansion, at 314 Jarvis Street, the former home of Toronto's Chief Medical Officer from 1893-1910, and a significant historical site.

All three vacant buildings were part of consolidated development sites. They were allowed to remain empty for years, growing ever more neglected over time. The protections required by the City were minimal; boards on the windows to prevent trespass. Enhanced security measures, such as bricked-up or barred windows and high fences, were not imposed until after the incidents had occurred.

Toronto has many vacant buildings - of heritage interest or otherwise - that pose a continual risk to neighbouring communities and first responders, while a property owner is waiting for a buyer; or a planning application is in dispute. Even with development permissions in place, currently, an owner can let a vacant property languish for months, or years, without any consequence. This is an unacceptable waste of existing residential space, in the middle of a tragic housing crisis. Buildings that are kept in use are much safer, than those that have been abandoned to decay, accomplishing demolition by neglect.

Empty buildings are a known temptation for trespass and arson. It is imperative that the City ensure that such buildings are either secured to the highest degree, or made habitable in the interim prior to re-development or a pending sale. Such actions will improve safety for residents and first responders, aid in the preservation of vulnerable heritage properties, and protect viable housing, in buildings that may otherwise sit empty.

Recommendations:

1. The Planning and Housing Committee request the Executive Director, Municipal Licensing and Standards to consult with the Fire Chief and General Manager, Toronto Fire Services, the Chief Planner and Executive Director, City Planning, and the Chief Building Official and Executive Director, Toronto Building, to compile data and identify options to improve safety and

security for vacant buildings, as well as mechanisms to require habitable buildings to be kept in use, prior to redevelopment, and report back, with recommendations, to the Planning and Housing Committee in third quarter of 2020.

Respectfully submitted,

Councillor Kristyn Wong-Tam
Ward 13, Toronto Centre