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HOUSE OF COMMONS
CHAMBRE DES COMMUNES
CANADA

Jenny Kwan

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May 17, 2023

City of Vancouver
Attn: Development Permit Board
453 West 12th Ave
Vancouver, BC V5Y 1V4
Sent via email

Dear Development Permit Board members and staff,

Open letter re: 105 Keefer Street development application

It is with some distress that I find myself writing the Development Permit Board today to put forward objections to the application for a development permit for the 105 Keefer Street site, in the heart of Chinatown.

In 2017 I wrote 2 letters to the then-Mayor and Council and the Development Permit Board to oppose both the rezoning and development permit application. Rather than restate those abundant concerns, I have enclosed a copy of those letters for your reference.

The fact of the matter is that the reasoning for the substantive objections of the community to this proposed development have not dissipated in the intervening six years. In fact, opposition remains strong, and if anything, the need for a socially and culturally appropriate development for this site is more urgent than ever.

By way of historical context, Vancouver's Chinatown is the largest in Canada. It was established back in the 1890s and is amongst the oldest Chinatowns. 105 Keefer is directly adjacent to the Chinatown Memorial Square, which houses the historically significant monument to commemorate the Chinese railway workers and WWII Veterans. This Memorial depicts the history of Chinese Canadians in Canada and is profound in its meaning to our community. It is also surrounded by the Chinese Cultural Centre, the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Garden, and the Andy Livingstone Park; all of which are important cultural sites and spaces for the Chinatown community.

The distinctive and beautiful buildings in the community, constructed by benevolent associations to help fellow community members, are living monuments to both the struggle and resilience of the people of this community. Many of the historic buildings continue to serve the community today as gathering places, activity spaces, and homes for Chinese Canadian seniors.

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Therefore, it must be understood that the discussion of the 105 Keefer Street site pertains to a unique and irreplaceable national heritage jewel with monumental cultural and historical significance.

As you are aware, Chinatown originally developed due to discriminatory laws forbidding people of Chinese heritage from living and working elsewhere in the city, a history that is shared with Indigenous, Black, and other racialized communities who were also marginalized in the area. This history is reflected in the physical and social constitution of Chinatown, where many of its historic struggles persist today.

The COVID-19 pandemic, its devastating and often fatal impacts on the lives of elders in our community, the hardships faced by small businesses in its wake, and the incitements of anti-Asian racism and targeted acts of hate have beleaguered the community and raised even higher barriers of difficulty to maintaining the inherent character of the Chinatown neighbourhood. Affordability, homelessness, availability of amenities, and financial insecurity for the many low-income inhabitants of Chinatown has worsened. As such the need for socially and culturally appropriate developments in the neighbourhood is more urgent than ever and the development of 105 Keefer is crucial to the future of historic Chinatown.

While I am heartened by the work of cultural institutions like the Chinatown Storytelling Centre, the Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Classical Gardens, and most recently the Chinese Canadian Museum to build strong bridges between Chinatown's past and its future; however, I would be remiss if I do not note the fact that despite historic Chinatown's status as a national historic site, it remains at great risk. As noted on Heritage Vancouver and the National Trust's endangered places lists, gentrification and lack of affordable housing is having profound impacts on the community, as heritage businesses, families and low-income seniors are priced out.

The 2023 context only underscores the need to review the 105 Keefer development permit application with every sensitivity, and to favour a rather more restrictive than relaxed reading of the intent and controls offered by the HA-1A policies and guidelines, which are intended to "encourage the preservation and rehabilitation of the significant early buildings of Chinatown" that fulsomely acknowledges the distinction of this community.

The application requests variance from the 2017 HA-1A maximum building height, requesting that the total height of new construction reach 102 feet, well above the 2017 allowable maximum of 89 feet; requesting that corner units exceed allowable frontage of Columbia Street retail design; requesting relaxation of rear yard requirement. All are indices that the applicant's design went beyond the conditions for outright approval use based on the HA-1A district schedule active in 2017.

I also note that, although the Development Permit Board did not approve the applicant's proposal in 2017, even the more favourable comments by City staff in their October 18, 2017 Development Permit Staff Committee Meeting document made comment on a number of design issues and requested significant redress by the applicant "to improve liveability", enhancing common residential amenity space, "to improve the public realm and retail storefront", "to improve the building elevations", to provide more information on the architectural detailing, bird-friendly design, and accessible rooftop plans.

Instead of redressing these aspects the proponent seeks to revisit the original application. The design needs such significant work to meet the context of a culturally appropriate design that I do not believe it appropriate to grant a permit even with conditions.

Building design, use and function in a city must be contextual to the people who make up a neighbourhood, who live, work and play in its environs. Development decisions have tangible impacts on the quality of their life. Eroding Chinatown's long history as an inclusive and affordable place for people to rent by redeveloping with market-priced condominiums will only add weight to the forces of displacement, and isolate the many low-income people, especially Chinese seniors, for whom this is their home.

In an October 2017 letter, Heritage Vancouver stated that "the approval of this development faces an extremely large burden of justification related to the uniqueness of its context that is not reflected in the zoning rules". I entirely agree.

Municipal governance has a duty to intervene in ways that will ensure we reach social goals and produce housing, amenities and nurture public spaces based on evidenced need. The younger generation of deeply connected activists and cultural workers who are fighting to protect Chinatown as a site of not only cultural preservation, but also as a community that can foster intergenerational connections and support the emergence of a progressive and inclusive Chinese Canadian culture are ready to lead the way in this, with the inclusion and wisdom of community elders as equal partners.

I would also urge that, looking to the future, the City engage in discussions with the proponent to discuss alternative creative solutions, or a land purchase by the City or land swap, to facilitate a solution that is in alignment with the will of the neighbours, led and managed by community organizations who work together to determine the area's future, in accordance with the Vancouver Chinatown Cultural Heritage Assets Management Plan Strategic Framework. Since the City of Vancouver owns a number of valuable city sites, I urge Council to direct staff to review and bring forward a short list of sites that might be suitable for consideration of a land swap.

I continue to stand with the Chinatown community in the fight for the heart and soul of this community and therefore urge, for the reasons above, that you reject once again the proponent's development permit application for 105 Keefer Street.

Thank you for your time and attention to this very important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jenny Kwan', written in a cursive style.

Jenny Kwan
Member of Parliament for Vancouver East

Cc: Mr. Ken Sim, Mayor of Vancouver
Vancouver City Council members

Encl.