

Historic Pantages Theatre for sale

Proposal to save site apparently died at an in camera council session

John Mackie

Vancouver Sun

Wednesday, October 22, 2008

VANCOUVER - The much-ballyhooed deal to restore Western Canada's oldest remaining theatre appears to have fallen through.

The Pantages Theatre has been listed for sale for \$8.2 million. The property at 144-150 East Hastings is listed by Colliers International as part of a six-lot parcel that had been assembled by Marc Williams of Worthington Properties.

In April, Williams announced a complex \$26-million plan to restore the 100-year-old theatre. Worthington was also going to spend about \$30 million on up to 136 units of social housing in a new building adjacent to the theatre. The deal hinged on Worthington receiving an unspecified amount of bonus density it could move to another site.

Williams declined to comment when reached Monday. Mayoral candidates Peter Ladner of the NPA and Gregor Robertson of Vision Vancouver did not return e-mails and phone calls about the issue. A call to the city's heritage department was rerouted to Sue Harvey, the city's managing director of cultural services, who did not return the call.

The deal was apparently rejected at an in camera meeting of council in late September. Some city staff members supported the proposal, but Harvey, the city's powerful culture czar, is said to have been against it.

The Pantages was built by showbiz legend Alexander Pantages in 1907-08, and is the oldest survivor of a chain of vaudeville houses that once stretched across North America. Pantages built a second, grander theatre at 20 West Hastings in 1917 and sold his original theatre.

It was converted to a movie house in the late 1920s, and in the early '30s survived a fire in the projectionist's booth and a bomb that was thrown into the theatre during a labour meeting. It has had several names over its lifetime, including the Royal, State, Queen, Avon and City Nights. It last operated as the Sung Sing, a Chinese-language theatre, but has been closed since 1994.

The restored theatre would have had 650 seats, which would have filled a void in Vancouver's live-theatre scene between small and big houses. Worthington was to lease it to the non-profit Pantages Theatre Arts Society for \$1 annually.

The Pantages is listed as a Heritage B building on Vancouver's heritage register, which means it has some protection, but could still be demolished. There was a proposal to build social housing on the site in the mid-90s, but it fell through. It was sold for \$300,000 in 2000 and for \$440,000 in 2004. The building suffered significant water damage from a leaky roof a few years ago and restoration costs

have risen astronomically.

The city issued a press release late Tuesday stating it is "funding a feasibility study to explore the potential future of the Pantages Theatre site." At virtually the same time, the Pantages Theatre Arts Society sent an email to its supporters stating the property has been listed for sale and that "we presume this irreplaceable heritage and community structure will be destroyed."

The letter urged supporters to email city council about the project.

"You might want to note that the Pantages Project is a unique opportunity to do something extraordinary at Hastings and Main, for the people of Vancouver, and for heritage and the arts," it read.

"There is -- literally -- nothing else like it in the city. And never will be again."

Part of the reason the deal may have fallen through is because of a moratorium on density transfers for heritage buildings. Under Vancouver's heritage density transfer program, owners of old buildings could sell off bonus density to help pay the high costs of restoration. Developers would buy the density and add extra floors to a project, and the program proved to be very successful.

Developer Robert Fung has done several heritage restoration projects. Restoring the Flack block at Cambie and Hastings cost \$20 million, and \$5 million came from density transfers.

"All the heritage projects that we're doing would have been impossible to do without the incentives," said Fung. "It does not bode well for any heritage projects if there's nothing there to help support them, because they just don't work."

jmackie@vancouver.sun.com

© The Vancouver Sun 2008

[CLOSE WINDOW](#)

Copyright © 2008 CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.
CanWest Interactive, a division of CanWest MediaWorks Publications, Inc.. All rights reserved.