

# Cecil Hotel no more

BY JOEL KOM, CALGARY HERALD FEBRUARY 27, 2009

After nearly a century of existence, the Cecil Hotel is no more.

The physical building is still standing at the corner of 3rd Street and 4th Avenue S.E., but it is now officially in the City of Calgary's hands after a \$10.9 million deal closed this week.

The city took possession of the building Friday, ending a run that began in 1912 as an inn for labourers but finished with police painting it as the site of persistent criminal activity.

That led to the city suspending the hotel tavern's business licence in December, which turned out to be the precursor to the city buying the property it sees as potential prime downtown real estate.

"I'm pleased," said Ald. Druh Farrell, whose area includes the Cecil. "We now have an opportunity to put in something that contributes to the community around it."

Even after its death, however, the hotel is still stirring political emotions.

Ald. Diane Colley-Urquhart said the deal was a waste of money, adding her request for \$2.75 million for artificial turf fields earlier this week was turned down even though it would have helped thousands of people.

"To think that only five days ago I begged council for \$2.75 million," she said.

"But yet we have money to turn around and buy a place like this when the private sector could have easily done it. It's disgusting."

Farrell said the expense is justifiable because the deal will help the city change the face of East Village.

"We're looking at a long-term benefit for that site," she said.

What most people who work near the Cecil agree on is that the once-notorious corner is now quiet for the first time in recent memory.

Last year alone, police were called to the building more than 1,700 times.

In the first six weeks of the bar being shut down after its licence was suspended, police calls dropped by 91 per cent.

"If we can build the reputation of the area again without the Cecil, then we're laughing," said Mike Lachapelle, general manager of Booker's BBQ Grill and Crab Shack, adding his restaurant never had

direct problems with the hotel but customers were intimidated by it.

Louise Gallagher, a spokeswoman for the nearby Calgary Drop-In Centre, said the area has gotten safer since the Cecil's closure.

But it hasn't erased the drug and other criminal activity police said was once rampant there.

Residents in Bridgeland have reported seeing more drug deals in their area, and Gallagher said the Drop-In is also feeling the impacts.

"The dealers are definitely trying to get in more (to the centre)," she said.

The city's attention now turns to what to do with the site.

Its former owner, Sam Silberman, had appealed the licence suspension, but city officials said that appeal is now moot with the deal closing.

The Calgary Parking Authority has expressed interest in the site for a parkade, and others have mused about putting residences and businesses on the downtown corner.

Farrell said whatever happens with the building, it will be a multi-use site.

For now, though, it sits empty.

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