

# Massive fire engulfs construction site in Richmond

BY TRACY SHERLOCK AND LAURA KANE, VANCOUVER SUN MAY 5, 2011



Firefighters battle a blaze at a six storey building under construction at Garden City and Cambie in Richmond, BC., on May 4, 2011. The building was the first six storey residential structure built in Richmond.

Photograph by: Nick Procajlo, PNG

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For more photos of the Richmond fire that destroyed a six-storey building overnight, [please click here.](#)

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METRO VANCOUVER - Two of the first six-storey wood-frame buildings approved under a revised B.C. building code allowing higher wood construction burnt to the ground in a massive fire in Richmond late Tuesday.

The development, called The Remy, at 9388 Cambie Rd., is a 188-unit condo project that includes 81 affordable-housing units and a daycare.

Taking advantage of building code changes introduced in 2009, The Remy was to have been the first development in B.C. to go above four storeys using wood, rather than concrete.

Previously, wood-frame buildings were limited to four storeys due to fire risk and structural concerns. The code was changed as part of the B.C. Wood First Act that aimed to stimulate the province's timber industry. The provincial government was persuaded that improved fire prevention techniques

such as sprinkler systems that extended to balconies would make the buildings safe.

Still, the revised building code met with some criticism from fire officials who worried their equipment would not be able to handle fires in wood buildings that height.

In 2009, Richmond Fire Rescue fire prevention officer Dave Clou wrote a report to city council warning that taller wood buildings “raise several concerns within the fire services community.”

The report says Richmond’s 75-foot ladder trucks would not be able to reach the heights of buildings allowed under the new code, especially given that parking lots are built above street grade because the city is at sea level.

“To fight a fire effectively in such a structure will require new firefighting tactics, which could also require additional firefighting resources, more personnel and higher reaching ladder trucks,” the report warned.

Tim Wilkinson, deputy chief of operations for Richmond Fire Rescue, said the firefighters had the appropriate ladders necessary to fight this fire.

The report referred to Richmond’s need for higher ladders for rescue operations, he said, but it was not a concern in this case because the building was uninhabited.

On Wednesday, as the building still smouldered, city, fire and provincial government officials rushed to reassure the public that wood-frame buildings are safe. Because the building was under construction, sprinkler systems and fire retardant materials had not yet been installed.

“I can assure the public that wood-frame construction is safe, even with six-storey buildings and this kind of building isn’t unique to B.C.,” said an email from the Ministry of Energy. “A building that’s under construction does not have many of its fire safety features that slow the spread of a fire in place, like sprinkler systems, fire doors, and windows.”

Wilkinson conceded that the wood contributed to the severity of the fire.

“Wood obviously is going to add to the fire because it’s a product that burns ...,” Wilkinson said, adding that fires at construction sites are difficult to extinguish because the sprinkler systems and other fire protection measures aren’t complete.

“It’s just simply that it’s a very big building that’s under construction.”

City of Richmond spokesman Ted Townsend said the city had addressed some of the fire rescue concerns.

“There were some improvements made to address safety concerns, within the building code; one was requiring sprinklers on balconies.”

However, Townsend said the city has not made any specific purchases related to fighting fires in taller buildings.

The developer, Dana Westermarck, owner and president of Oris Development Corporation, said he intends to rebuild.

“This is a difficult time, not only for us as a developer but for the buyers and partners who have been involved with us throughout the process,” Westermarck said. “We ask for everyone’s patience and vow that we will move ahead and deliver on our promise to bring a new, vibrant community to Richmond centre.”

One of the buildings that burned was entirely slated for affordable housing and was to open later this year.

The second building, scheduled to open in 2012, included 107 units of market housing, 85 per cent of which had already been sold.

The intense fire, visible from kilometres away, broke out at around 11 p.m. No one was injured, but the blaze left Richmond streets smoke-filled and smelling of burning wood well into Wednesday.

The investigation into the cause of the fire is in the early stages, and investigators don’t yet know how and where it started or if it is suspicious, said Wilkinson. He said investigators are using social media to find information, including videos posted on YouTube.

The two buildings were fully engulfed by flames when firefighters arrived. An abandoned home beside the site was also destroyed.

Wilkinson said investigators may be able to get a closer look in a day or so.

Brianna Schofield was at a friend’s place near the fire when they smelled smoke.

“We were there before the fire trucks or anything,” Schofield said. “There was tons of smoke and ambers in the sky. I’ve never seen anything like this.

“We were standing on Odlin Road and the heat was unbelievable. I had to get back into my car — it looked like a wall of fire.”

Shortly after she arrived at the scene, Schofield heard a large boom and the power went out.

“It was pitch black. We thought it was raining, but really it was all the soot coming down on us. We were covered in it,” she said. “The ashes falling from the sky were so big and still in flames that it caught two homes on fire.”

Falling ashes and embers blowing off the fire caused spot fires throughout the city, Townsend said. All available Richmond firefighters were at the main fire, so firefighters were called in from Vancouver.

Ten other homes were damaged by the blowing embers, Wilkinson said.

Schofield saw the large building collapse as it burned.

“It was unbelievable to see. The entire building was in flames,” she said. “We saw all the people getting evacuated on Odlin Road — it’s all brand-new apartments there — and we saw them closing the gas station beside the fire.”

Desmond Mok heard about the fire on Facebook and rushed as close as he could get to the fire, on Stolberg Street and Capstan Way.

“There were more than 200 people watching. Cars were everywhere and everyone was taking pictures and talking about the fire,” Mok said. “The ashes were blowing ... and you could see explosions in the air and hear loud crackling sounds of the fire in the building.”

Edward Mak, who was standing at the corner of Cambie and Garden City at 12:30 a.m., reported that he could feel the heat from the flames on his face. “The sky is covered with ashes. The two [construction] cranes are still standing but the actual building that is burning is starting to collapse on to Cambie street.”

The federal and provincial governments contributed \$4.7 million for the affordable housing, the province gave \$500,000 for the daycare and the City of Richmond gave \$900,000 for the daycare. The daycare centre did not burn down, but was damaged in the fire. Construction had not yet begun on a third building planned for the site.

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With files from Gillian Burnett

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Before



During



After

