

June 17, 2015

Yesterday was a very sad day in Berkeley, and unfortunately the pall will hang over our city for a long time. The balcony collapse affected me very personally because of my many Irish friends. (I have been affiliated with the Berkeley theatrical group Wilde Irish Productions for several years.) Also my work as a carpenter gives me an insider view of construction. Of course, as a parent I can fully imagine the deep pain of the parents of these young people.

Discussing this yesterday with my colleagues in the post office struggle, we feel that Berkeley needs to address the tragedy with a response commensurate with its immensity. The mayor's sincere response that the city will "fully investigate" and leave "no rock unturned" is not enough. Any responsible local official would give us this assurance, but this an event of international proportions.

I suggest that the City of Berkeley immediately issue a moratorium on all commercial construction projects, as well as all planning and zoning processes. Halting construction may seem extreme, but this would be like grounding all models of an airplane after a crash. We're not talking about just one balcony on one building; there are certainly other types of faulty construction that may pose life threatening risks. We obviously live in earthquake country. We should not be oblivious to the massive damage that this event portends. The moratorium would give the city enough time to investigate and to address adequately whatever problems are discovered.

There are most certainly buildings of similar shoddy construction – proposed, under construction and already constructed. We probably have to go back a couple of decades to be really certain. I believe Library Gardens was constructed by a large developer not from Berkeley. That could be a red flag, but we only have to remember the saga of a Berkeley developer and the Gaia Building to realize this type of problem goes back many years and is not limited to outsiders just interested in making a quick buck. We need an external, independent review of construction standards, inspection process, etc.

Although there was a memorial event at the site yesterday and the mayor and Irish consul have spoken, there needs to be a large well-organized public event that expresses the whole city's grief and remorse and provides an opportunity to raise funds to support the grieving families. Venues like the Greek Theater or the Berkeley Community Theater would be appropriate. I assume the city is preparing an official apology beyond what has already been given, but the citizens need a way to express themselves, too. Long term, there ought to be some permanent memorial in downtown Berkeley to these young people or maybe the funding of a living memorial.

Finally, there needs to be a criminal investigation. I don't see the city doing this because it will probably be named as a defendant. However, the appropriate agency

or agencies need to pursue this matter with all due diligence. Many are viewing these young people as victims of the current wave of greedy and grotesque development in Berkeley and elsewhere. Balconies have been built for millennia. How did these developers and/or property managers get away with this? Have large sums of developer money clouded our city's prioritization of truly affordable, safe and sustainable housing?

A recurrence of a similar tragedy requires a somber examination of our current practices, policies and priorities. If some meaning is to be given to this tragedy, let it be the spark that puts an end to the changes brought to our city by money grubbing investors and those that collude with them. The whole world is watching. Berkeley needs to do this right.

Harvey Smith