

Former councillor wants protest policy withdrawn

BY KEVIN GRIFFIN, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 23, 2013

A new policy by the Vancouver police department to threaten people with criminal charges over the loudness of what they say at public protests may have a chilling effect on what people say on picket lines and other legal protests throughout the city, according to former COPE city councillor Tim Louis.

Mayor Gregor Robertson should intervene, as chair of the Vancouver Police Board, to get the policy overturned, Louis said Monday in a news release.

"I want the mayor to act with common sense as a good mayor would," Louis added in a phone interview.

"I want the mayor to act with intelligence and common sense to a) get the police department to withdraw this new and very draconian policy and b) to defuse tensions where tensions need to be defused."

The mayor heads the seven-member Vancouver Police Board, which provides civilian governance and oversight of the Vancouver police department.

Robertson said citizens have the right to peaceful protest but not to "block access or physically harass those seeking to enter or leave a restaurant.

"I support the Vancouver police department's prudent steps to ensure that the right to protest is balanced against the right of all residents and businesses to peaceful enjoyment of public and private spaces," Robertson said in a news release.

"Poverty in the Downtown Eastside remains a very serious issue but the aggressive nature of some of these protests is an unfortunate distraction from getting attention on affordable housing and income assistance in the provincial election. Repeatedly targeting a single new business and its customers with protests is not constructive to solving huge challenges like homelessness and chronic poverty."

Last Wednesday, Vancouver Police issued a news release that said "Some Protesters to Receive Notice of Criminal Conduct by Police."

Although neither the news release nor the letters handed out mentioned Pidgin restaurant, the site of continuing protests against gentrification in the Downtown Eastside, police handed out "criminal conduct warning" letters to specific protesters outside the Carrall Street business.

The letter said that some protesters could face a criminal mischief charge for their actions. Criminal mischief prohibits anyone from obstructing, interrupting or interfering with another person in the "lawful use, enjoyment operation of property."

The letter from Vancouver Police claims that definition includes speech such as "shouting, screaming, or swearing."

The police news release claimed the warning letters were being given to protesters "believed to be crossing the line between peaceful protest and criminal acts."

In B.C., police may arrest an individual but it is up to Crown Counsel to decide whether to lay charges.

kevingriffin@vancouversun.com