

### **Backgrounder on the Wonder and Palace SRO Hotels**

The Wonder and Palace hotels are two of Vancouver's most notorious SRO hotels located on Cordova and Hastings Street in the Downtown Eastside. Up until 2012 they were owned and operated by George Wolsey, through numbered companies and a non-profit called the "Wilson Recovery Society". In 2004 Wolsey, who was then a pharmacist, had his pharmacy license stripped from him for forcing residents of his buildings to get their methadone prescriptions filled solely through him, and for other infractions. Tenants who refused and took their methadone prescriptions elsewhere were illegally evicted.

#### **Actions taken by Vancouver City Council:**

In June of 2011 the City of Vancouver announced it would be taking action against George Wolsey to force him to make repairs and renovations to both the Palace and Wonder hotels. An administrative report made by the City of Vancouver summarized the use inspections made by the City, and cited numerous bylaw infractions and needed repairs.

The report, submitted to Vancouver City Council, detailed violations which included life-threatening conditions such as broken fire escapes and non-functional fire barriers. Vancouver City Council voted in favour of pursuing injunctive relief against George Wolsey to force him to repair his buildings for existing tenants, and also to create an SRO Tenants' Rights Task Force along with a Methadone Working Group to review the state of SRO housing and methadone distribution in the city. During the summer of 2012, facing an injunction by the City and foreclosure from his bank, Wolsey sold the hotels.

#### **Actions taken by the residents of the Wonder and Palace hotels:**

In September of 2011 eleven residents brought Dispute Resolution action against Mr. Wolsey claiming damages for loss of property and various breaches under the Residential Tenancy Act. Of those eleven residents three settled their claims before the hearings commenced, three were successful in obtaining a monetary award against Wolsey, and four were delayed due to appeals. In total the Residential Tenancy Branch awarded \$10,931.25 to tenants who were evicted by Wolsey.

In January of 2013 another ten tenants came forward claiming abuses by Wolsey for the period of time they lived at the Wonder and Palace, and filed cases with the Residential Tenancy Branch for compensation. Their hearings were held in May of this year, and Pivot recently received the results. All ten residents were successful in their claims, and were awarded damages ranging from \$375 to \$3,870. In this second round of cases the Residential Tenancy Branch ordered Wolsey to pay a total of \$18,163.75, raising the grand total of money awarded to tenants of the Wonder and Palace to over \$29,000.

While the original three tenants were able to obtain payment from Wolsey, the \$18,163.75 debt that is currently owed to the second round of tenants remains outstanding, despite numerous attempts to serve Wolsey with documents and call him into court to pay. On September 3, 2013, the court ordered arrest warrants for Wolsey after he again failed to appear to address the debts. Pivot is now calling on Wolsey to turn himself in, or face arrest.