

**Pilon, Janet**

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**Subject:** Opposition to selling the Dundas alley

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**From:** Biljana Vasilevska

**Sent:** June-26-17 9:36 PM

**To:** clerk@hamilton.ca

**Subject:** Opposition to selling the Dundas alley

Dear Clerk,

Please accept my submission to City Council for the meeting on Wednesday June 28th. The letter below was submitted as and Opinion article in the Hamilton Spectator on Tuesday June 27, 2017.

Across Hamilton, hidden gems are being rediscovered. Seemingly hiding in plain sight, these facets of our urban environment that were often invisible to outsiders are now celebrated and recognized for their beauty and charm. Now that they have been discovered, some of these gems are threatened by people who should be their protectors.

Waterfalls? James North? Ottawa or Concession Streets? No: Alleys.

In the city's oldest neighbourhoods, back lanes were built as part of large housing developments in the late 1800's and early 1900's. They follow the grid pattern of the roads, and are just barely wide enough to accommodate a utility truck. These back lanes, also called alleys, were used to collect garbage and to deliver the coal. Later, the alleys gave residents access to their backyards for the safe keeping of their horses and buggies. We don't heat our homes with coal or keep horses and buggies in the city anymore, and our garbage trucks now use the main roads. Yet, most of the alleys remain, offering communal green space as well as safe walking and biking routes.

For many, "alley" is a negative word, conjuring images of dark, narrow lanes, garbage, graffiti, muggings, and, well, you get the picture.

Instead, picture this: Every morning and afternoon, children walk to and from school along the alley; their parents have told them to walk in the alley instead of on the sidewalk beside the road, to avoid the large trucks and heavy traffic that speed by. Picture brightly lit lanes of grass and gravel, where the alley's edge blends seamlessly with a homeowner's carefully tended garden. Picture flowers in bright hues of yellow, violet and blue chosen to attract pollinating birds and insects. Picture small houses where a garage used to stand. Picture people walking their dogs, cycling to and from work and school, and driving - slowly - to access their backyard garages and parking pads. Instead of blank fences and graffiti covered walls, imagine murals, some featuring historical and cultural images, others of a whimsical, fantastical nature.

It may be difficult to appreciate the beauty, functionality and possibilities of these small back roads, unless you have lived next to one. This vision is not a fantasy. New York's East Village is home to a Garden Alley, attracting locals and tourist to appreciate quiet green space in the big city. In Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, the Milky Way Garden is providing opportunity for newcomers to support themselves and their community through urban gardens. Nor is it a fantasy in Vancouver, where homeowners are encouraged to build laneway houses to increase the amount of affordable housing available in that expensive city. In each of these cities, local governments have realized that alleys can be vibrant, safe, beautiful gathering spots, well-cared for by residents, and they have supported residents through amending zoning and financing projects to creatively re-purpose the alleys.

This is our vision for the alleys of Hamilton. As members of the community group Beautiful Alleys, we organize clean up events in the lower city neighbourhoods every April and September. Throughout the year, we connect our neighbours with environmental groups, artists, by-law officers and departments within the City of Hamilton

to realize our vision of safe, clean, beautiful alleys that are accessible to people of all ages and all physical abilities. We have worked with civil servants and our councillors to realize this vision. Unfortunately, we are finding that this vision, and the hard work of many residents, is under threat.

The beautiful alleys found in Toronto, Vancouver and New York also exist closer to home. In the Beasley neighbourhood, what was once called "Listerine Alley" is now a destination for urban art explorers. The businesses along King Street in downtown Hamilton have commissioned artists to create the Art Alley on the northern side of the downtown Business Improvement Area. In the Gibson and Landsdale neighbourhoods, the environmental nonprofit Green Venture has brought children and artists together to paint murals on the back walls of willing businesses, and plant raised gardens in unused parking lots and alley.

As well as these destination alleys, the residents who live alongside the hundreds of alleys in the lower city, along the mountain brow, and in Dundas, see their alleys as a normal part of their lives, not any different from the streets out front. In these areas, residents use and tend to the alleys that our municipal government refers to as "unassumed." The City does not provide services like winter maintenance and garbage pickup in the alley, but they are an integral part of the urban environment for the many people who live near one. The language of "unassumed" is curious. Because the City has not "assumed" an alley, some in our municipal government have then assumed that the alleys are not worth their consideration.

We are concerned about the vote at the Public Works Committee on June 18th to approve the sale of an unassumed alley in Dundas for a mere \$2. This alley was unilaterally "assumed" by one resident, contrary to the wishes of his neighbours. Without consultation, this individual extended a fence into the alley, blocking access to a well-used route for school children. This kind of bullying should not be supported by our municipal employees nor by our elected officials. Indeed, allowing the individual to purchase the alley for \$2 is, in our view, rewarding bullying. Going against community wishes for the benefit of one individual, with laughably negligible gains for the city's coffers, is an affront to democracy and to values of neighbourliness and equity. Spaces that have been publicly accessible for generations should be kept public. While the City may not feel it has assumed responsibility for an alley, it would do well to acknowledge that the community has, in fact, taken up this responsibility itself. We call upon all our elected official at City Council, regardless of the ward they represent, to reject the sale of this alley, and instead to celebrate the efforts of community members who are making Hamilton's alleys safe, beautiful and inspiring spaces.