

## Flames and bulldozers flatten Pickering homes

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PICKERING -- There's nothing left of the home in which Martin and Sandra Norris raised their children, except for a couple of stones they managed to salvage from the rubble.

It was destroyed by fire on Aug. 15, but it would have been demolished anyway. The family has since learned it was one of 42 structures -- including seven deemed historically significant -- on the federal lands designated for a possible airport in north Pickering that landlord Transport Canada plans to demolish.

The Norris family was not living at the home during the fire. After 26 years in the bungalow built by previous residents, Transport Canada told the family to leave in late 2004 since the home apparently didn't meet building code standards. The federal government has been renting out houses and boarding up others in the area since it expropriated 18,500 acres in 1972.

After Transport Canada moved the family to a new home in Brougham, it was boarded up and left vacant.

"That was almost 30 years of our life," Ms. Norris said.

Ms. Norris found it hard to drive past the home, but seeing it after the fire was even worse.



Ryan Pfeiffer / Metroland

PICKERING -- Sandra Norris' former home, where she and her husband lived for 27 years and raised two children, burned down August 14. They had moved out five years ago and the house was boarded up, but the loss is still tough. August 19, 2010.

"In a way it's like a real definite end for the house," she said.

Pickering Fire Deputy Chief Gord Ferguson confirmed the fire has been deemed suspicious.

"There's no power to the place, it's vacant, so how does it start on fire?" he said.

He said another property burned down in early June. Although Transport Canada does have security on the lands, he said they unfortunately can't be everywhere at all times.

Ms. Norris wasn't surprised to learn the home was slated for demolition, given its neglect since 2004. And she doesn't have much hope for the other vacant homes; just from her window, she can see six boarded up.

"It's the slowest death you could ever imagine," she said.

In an e-mail, Transport Canada spokesman Jeremy Link confirmed the government intends to demolish 41 structures.

"Transport Canada is taking measures to ensure the health and safety of Pickering Lands Site tenants, employees of the Crown or its agents, and the general public by demolishing these vacant, abandoned buildings," he said. "These vacant buildings could pose a variety of safety and health concerns including any combination of entrapment hazards, environmental risks such as exposure to mould, deep flooded basements, and compromised structural components."

Ajax-Pickering MP Mark Holland hopes to put a stop to unnecessary demolitions, something the Liberal government had done in the past.

He called the structures "monuments of mismanagement" and accused the government of allowing them to rot and demolishing them to de-populate the community.

Therefore he's not surprised with the recent announcement.

"I wish it was a shock but this is something they've been doing continually," he said.

Destroying these homes will obliterate a part of Pickering's history it will never get back, he said.

"The problem is once you destroy them, they're gone forever," he said.

Mr. Link said Transport Canada has learned seven of the homes are of potential heritage interest to Pickering.

"Transport Canada will permit the City of Pickering to access, research and submit requests to relocate federally owned buildings that are of local heritage significance, to sites off the Pickering Lands Site," he said.

He added Transport Canada may delay the removal of the seven structures to allow the City to undertake internal assessments.

Mr. Holland said he has a decent working relationship with the new transport minister and hopes they can come to an agreement.

"If we can't, obviously I'm going to have to apply as much political pressure as I can to do what we did with other heritage properties," he said.

It still hasn't been determined whether a Pickering airport will be built. Mr. Holland continues to ask the federal government to release the overdue due diligence review to see if an airport has even been deemed necessary.