

New LED streetlights spark concerns



New LED streetlights were installed in early May as part of the first section of the \$5.4-million Comox-Helmcken greenway project. Location: Vancouver B.C. *Photograph By Tara Hansen*
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Some West End residents don't think it was a bright idea to install high-intensity streetlights along Comox Street.

Tara Hansen lives near the intersection of Bute and Comox and says the new LED streetlights, which were installed in early May as part of the first section of the \$5.4-million Comox-Helmcken greenway project, are keeping her and her neighbours up at night.

"People in my building are really pissed off because it is right on the corner and they've added lights as well as have them be excessively bright," she told the Courier. "The street resembles a soccer field or a mall parking lot or a film set_ Many of us are having problems sleeping due to the light and our animals are staying up all night, as it appears as though it is daylight outside despite blinds being pulled."

The white LED lights, which are estimated to be 40 per cent more energy efficient than the old streetlight bulbs, are part of Vancouver's Greenest City Action Plan, and lights are being replaced on an as-needed basis while a large-scale replacement plan for the entire city is being prepared for council.

Green Party Coun. Adrienne Carr agreed the new lights are an eyesore after a recent evening visit.

"I've taken her issue to our engineering department because I believe that they are egregiously bright for people who live near them, and the engineering department realized that there is a justification in the complaint," said Carr. "I actually just spoke with them and they said they are waiting for B.C. Hydro to install some technology that allows them to dim the lights. I'm hopeful that the solution will come quickly because in the meanwhile I think it is interrupting people's sleep."

The city's new director of streets, Taryn Scollard, said there shouldn't be problem with new street lights down the road.

"This is a project specific thing where the timing was a little bit off," admitted Scollard. The challenge is that city installs the lights and the traffic signals, and the electricity for these dimmers is a separate system done by B.C. Hydro."

She added that it is a new pilot project and that engineers misjudged a key factor in choosing brightness.

"You get to choose, based on pedestrian volume, essentially high, medium or low power," said Scollard. "Because we weren't sure how many pedestrians would be using it, we automatically went to the high. The good news is that they are three-phase lights. Right now they are turned on nine but as soon as the dimmer gets in, we will be turning them down to seven and then continue to monitor it. They should notice a difference as soon as they are installed."

Hansen, however, said dimming the lights isn't enough and points to a 2011 report from the City of Pittsburg, one of the first North American cities to explore widespread LED technology, that says the recommended color temperature of LED light should only be 3,500 Kelvins. Vancouver instead chose lights that are 4,000 Kelvins.

Hansen, a high school teacher, expressed her concerns to the city and also forwarded a recent study from Carnegie Mellon University's Remaking Cities Institute that suggests LED lights pose considerable health concerns.

"Bright white light suppresses melatonin, the hormone that regulates tumors," the report states. "Blue light wavelengths are to blame, because they 'reset' the circadian clocks of humans. This might account for the significantly higher rates (30-60 per cent) of breast and colorectal cancer in night shift workers."

In an email forwarded to the Courier, Phil Wong, the engineer in charge of the street lighting design for the project, told Hansen the decision was partly due to finances.

"I am aware of the Pittsburgh study and wanted to confirm that the LED fixtures chosen by the City are consistent with many of their recommendations," he wrote. "Fixtures with adjustable colour temperatures are not commonly available at reasonable cost. The City chose LED light fixtures with output that is considered to be less blue and available at a reasonable cost."

Hansen believes the decision is putting people's health at risk.

"They read the study, they knew the study said 4,000 is too high and for people and animals to be healthy it needed to be 3,500 and they put one in higher than that just to save money."

(Editor's note: This story has been updated since first being posted June 18, 2013.)

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