

Item 3.3

Notre Dame De Paris Fire

File No: S051491

Minute by the Lord Mayor

To Council:

On 16 April, 2019, many of us woke to the news that a fire had seriously threatened the 850 year old Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris.

The fire had been detected shortly before 7pm Paris time on Monday 15 April 2019, with firefighters arriving minutes later. About 400 firefighters battled the fire over the next four hours, while a solemn crowd looked on.

Stopping the fire in a twelfth century Gothic structure presented serious challenges. Although more dangerous, the fire had to be primarily fought from inside the cathedral to reduce the risk of damage. Applying water from outside risked deflecting flames and hot gases inwards. Jets of water pumped from the Seine were applied at lower-than-usual pressures to minimise damage to the cathedral and its contents. Aerial firefighting was not an option. Water dropped from heights could have done structural damage, with heated stone cracking if suddenly cooled.

Within an hour of the flames first being seen, the Cathedral roof and the 93 metre high spire were engulfed in fire and soon collapsed. Attempts to extinguish the roof had to be abandoned to save the Cathedral's two towers, which were integral to the structural survival of the entire edifice. Twenty firefighters had attempted to climb the towers' narrow spiral stairs, but were driven back by heat.

By around 11:15pm Paris time, the fire had weakened and the two towers were out of danger. After about 12 hours the fire was completely extinguished. The bell towers and other parts of the building would have collapsed had it continued for another 30 minutes.

The following morning, Parisians woke to an altered skyline and the news that many of the Cathedral's sacred relics, artworks and other treasures had been saved. Following a brief look inside the Cathedral with French President Emmanuel Macron, the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hidalgo, said that it was "less terrible" than she had feared and that the altar and its cross were preserved. Some artworks had been removed in preparation for restoration work, including gargoyles and 16 copper statues representing the Twelve Apostles and four evangelists. A human chain of emergency workers and civil servants, working while the fire still blazed, saved others. Many of the cathedral's sacred relics were held in the adjoining sacristy, which the fire did not reach.

The Cathedral spire and around two thirds of the wood and metal roof were destroyed. The remnants of the roof and spire fell onto the stone vault underneath, which forms the ceiling of the cathedral's interior. This stone vaulting, the work of the Cathedral's medieval builders, covered over all the main spaces, prevented burning timbers and molten lead from breaking through easily and causing significant damage to the cathedral's interior. Some sections of this vaulting did collapse, allowing debris from the burning roof to fall to the marble floor below.

While lead joints in some of the 19th-century stained-glass windows melted, three major rose windows, dating to the 13th century, were undamaged. The main cross and altar survived, along with the statues surrounding it, but several pews were destroyed and the sculpted arches blackened by smoke.

As the fire was extinguished, President Macron announced that France would rebuild the state-owned cathedral “because that’s what the French expect, because that’s what our history deserves, because it’s our profound destiny.” Within a day, donations of around 80 million Euros had been pledged towards rebuilding the Cathedral, and this now exceeds over one billion Euros.

Responding to these pledges, many by billionaires, Mayor Hidalgo said:

“I think it is history and heritage that unite us. In the defense of heritage there are humanist values at play, and if they are expressed this way, all the better.”

While she acknowledged the Cathedral’s religious significance, she said it was more than that: “It is a monument and a place that belongs to everyone who loves Paris and loves this story,” pointing out that Victor Hugo had said Paris belongs to all humankind.

The cultural commentator Constance Grady has described Notre Dame as “a symbol of human accomplishment, and more than that, of social accomplishment” while Victor Hugo saw Notre Dame as a work of art authored by humanity itself. In his opening of Book Three of his novel *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, written at a time when the cathedral was in a state of horrific disrepair, Hugo wrote:

"Great edifices, like great mountains, are the work of centuries. Art often undergoes a transformation while they are pending, pendent opera interrupta; they proceed quietly in accordance with the transformed art. The new art takes the monument where it finds it, incrusts itself there, assimilates it to itself, develops it according to its fancy, and finishes it if it can. The thing is accomplished without trouble, without effort, without reaction, — following a natural and tranquil law. It is a graft which shoots up, a sap which circulates, a vegetation which starts forth anew. Certainly there is matter here for many large volumes, and often the universal history of humanity in the successive engrafting of many arts at many levels, upon the same monument. The man, the artist, the individual, is effaced in these great masses, which lack the name of their author; human intelligence is there summed up and totalized. Time is the architect, the nation is the builder."

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council note the international significance of Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris as a sacred place, cultural treasure and symbol of human accomplishment;
- (B) Council express its support and sympathy to the citizens of Paris following the serious damage to Notre Dame Cathedral and the loss of its iconic spire, as a result of fire on 15 April, 2019
- (C) Council commend the commitment by Emmanuel Macron, President of France, to rebuild Notre Dame, and the support given by many people across the world to this project;
- (D) a letter, under the Lord Mayor's signature, be conveyed to the Mayor of Paris expressing the City of Sydney's support and sympathy for the citizens of Paris.

COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE

Lord Mayor