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Vandals rush to take apart old hospital

By: Taryn Utiger

Vandalism at New Plymouth's old Barrett St Hospital has spiked since last week's announcement of the full-site clearance.

Windows have been shattered, graffiti has been sprayed on outside walls and the number of people walking through the grounds at night has more than doubled, the complex's sole resident says.

Carla MacKinnon rents the old doctor's house and discovered the Ministry of Justice was proposing a full-site clearance last week after reading the Taranaki Daily News.

Since then the dilapidated buildings in the hospital complex have been further vandalised and Miss MacKinnon has seen people jumping the fence, wanting a final glimpse of the old hospital.

"There's a lot more damage than usual. Normally kids smash windows to get into the buildings, but they are not trying to break in, they are just damaging the place," said Miss MacKinnon, who has lived at the complex since July.

New Plymouth police have received no reports of new damage but said if the vandals were caught they would be subject to police inquiries.

The old hospital has been administered by the Ministry of Justice since 2006 as part of the Office of Treaty Settlements Landbank.

Te Atiawa Iwi Authority has previously expressed interest in the land under the proviso it was a clear site, due to the asbestos issues in the earthquake-prone buildings.

Miss MacKinnon, who was unaware of the proposed demolition until last week said she would be fighting to save parts of the complex, including the house she lives in, known as Baker Cottage.

The third-year psychology student has been researching the history of the site for several years and believes that parts of it should be given heritage ratings. She said she would be applying to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust to assess the original gates, the former doctor's residence and the nurses' home.

"This place has so much history and they are just going to knock it all down and no one will remember anything. We need to save something.

"The gates are about 100 years old from what I know. I've spent the last few weeks tidying up the inside of the fence and the gates. They were covered in agapanthus and rubbish," she said.

"The next step is to clean it all up on the street side."

Lil Anderson, from the Office of Treaty Settlements, would not be drawn on the future of the gates, or Baker Cottage.

"The specific details are still being worked through and this will take into account all heritage considerations," she said.

Until the fate of the complex was signed off security for the site would be monitored to ensure acts of vandalism did not rise.

"Further work will be undertaken to maintain and keep the Barrett St premises secure," Ms Anderson said.

Miss MacKinnon, who would ultimately like to buy the cottage she lives in, said until the proposed demolition was written in stone she would continue to restore the gates, clean the paths and collect the rubbish people dumped in the complex.

"If anyone is interested in trying to save part of this then come and see me and we can start a working bee team.

"But don't come here if you just want to vandalise things," she said.

CAPTION:

Heritage item: A picture of the gates of the old Barrett St Hospital taken around 1913.

Save the gates: Carla MacKinnon is the sole resident of the old Barrett St Hospital complex and is starting a campaign to save the iconic entrance gates from demolition or vandalism.

Picture: CAMERON BURNELL/FAIRFAX NZ

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Photo: CAMERON BURNELL/FAIRFAX NZ



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