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Re: Dangerous handling of fire at Reference Library

I was on the ground floor of the Toronto Reference Library 20 feet away from the fire that broke out there on September 4. I am writing to give the Board a firsthand account of how badly the fire was handled.

I smelled smoke for a couple of minutes but – foolishly – thought it was the result of welding. (I had seen exactly that on the second floor on a different occasion.) Eventually it became obvious that a real fire was happening. And at that point, the man who for some reason is the senior security guard on the day shift (interestingly, the only white male) bothered to waddle over, peer behind the construction tarp, and yell “Put it out!” to the workers there. (Pointless, since nobody had a fire extinguisher.)

The guard then repeatedly and almost unhurriedly waddled back and forth between the fire site and the distant control panel by the front doors, flip phone pressed against ear. I called 911 and was told there was already an active call. Moments later the first fire apparatus arrived. I could see a great deal of smoke on the west side of the ground floor from where I was standing (at the edge of Balzac’s). Minutes later, while I was across the street, TRL staff deigned to evacuate at least the ground floor.

The fire was put out. TPL publicist Ed Karek wandered around outside the building seeming unconcerned. Later, one of the very same construction workers involved in the fire (I had looked right at them at the time) stood inside the TRL Cube entrance grinning as he took iPhone pics of the fire trucks.

What didn’t happen?

1. Construction crew putting out fire, reporting fire, taking fire seriously
2. Any sense of urgency or, on the part of that security guard, seeming actually competent and up to the task
3. Fire alarm activated (TRL has hundreds of annunciators)
4. Early evacuation of ground floor and basement

TPL's procedures for handling life-and-death emergencies seem inadequate, in my direct experience. When I asked about the incident, Linda Mackenzie, director, Research and Reference Libraries, did not claim that procedures were followed correctly, only that procedures were in place. And it was apparently important to tell me there might have been an evacuation from exits I could not see, though Mackenzie did not claim that really happened. There was no discussion of lazily ordering labourers to put out a fire they themselves set without having a fire extinguisher on hand.

This time nobody died.

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