



Piney Ridge in south Belfast before its demolition

Developer's £150 court fine 'pitiful'

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A LEADING conservationist has condemned the punishment imposed on a developer for illegally demolishing a listed building as "pitiful".

Rita Harkin, of the Ulster Architectural Heritage Society, was speaking after a magistrate imposed a £150 fine this week on a businessman who bulldozed an historic property in the leafy Malone Road area of south Belfast over two years ago.

In March 2008, Piney Ridge was razed to the ground by Dermot Kennedy – a former Sinn Fein election candidate – after being badly damaged in a fire.

The grand property was built in 1920 and was listed as a grade B1 building in 1994.

Mr Kennedy – who pleaded guilty to demolishing the building without authority – claimed he took the drastic action to make the site safe and reduce the risk to the public.

Ortega Properties Limited – of which Mr Kennedy is a director – was also fined £200 following Wednesday's hearing.

The scale of the punishment comes despite the maximum penalty available under the Planning (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 for unauthorised demolition, extension, or alteration being a jail term of six months or a £30,000 fine.

Slamming the court verdict, Ms Harkin expressed her concern at the level of fine imposed.

"The fines are pitiful to the loss of a key historic building," she said.

"Our magistrates need to understand the fact that these buildings are very rare – only two per cent of our buildings are actually listed. I would like to think they would impose a fine that is commensurate with that loss."

Pointing to a case in the Republic, the conservationist called for Piney Ridge to be accurately reinstated.

In 1999, the art deco, a grade

one listed garage in Dublin, was illegally demolished by contractors. Following a public outcry, the developer was ordered by the city council to reconstruct the garage or face a possible €1,000,000 fine and/or imprisonment.

"The very important message is that anything that goes back in its place (Piney Ridge) should be an accurate reinstatement of the building.

"Even though the historic building has been lost there is enough detail and evidence to accurately reinstate."

The secluded Piney Ridge site has remained derelict since Easter 2008.

When contacted by the News Letter, a spokesperson for the Planning Service said: "The 2003 planning amendment order sets out increased levels of penalties for those found guilty of breaking planning laws. However, sentencing and the level of penalty or fine imposed is a matter for the judiciary."