

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

From: Lori Salganicoff, Executive Director, Chestnut Hill Conservancy
Eileen Javers, President, Chestnut Hill Conservancy

Date: April 8, 2018

RE: Rex Avenue Preservation and Development

The Chestnut Hill Conservancy's primary interest in the project at 208-10 Rex Avenue is preserving the historic mansion and helping to encourage that any new development be consistent with the character of the area. The historic Italianate house was the first structure on its large block when it was created 160 years ago, and is a well-preserved and significant example of Chestnut Hill's architectural heritage. A substantial rear wing was added in 1927 in the Arts and Crafts style by Philadelphia architect H. Louis Duhring, who owned and resided in the house between 1919 and 1946. Noted artist Paul Rickert lived in the Duhring addition from the late 1970s until about six years ago.

As reported in last week's Chestnut Hill Local, the Chestnut Hill Conservancy nominated this significant but unprotected historic property to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places a year ago. Although the Historical Commission has yet to finalize this designation, it has jurisdiction over this and any other project that is formally under consideration for designation. This ensures that the building's exterior cannot be substantially altered, nor can the building be demolished, without the review and approval of the Historical Commission.

The Conservancy recently heard from developers interested in purchasing the site; they described a project comprised of adaptive reuse and preservation of the historic mansion and new construction on the adjoining open lot. These developers, Guy and Colin Laren of Constellar Corporation, described that their plans for the site were at a relatively early stage, and that they wished to share their initial concepts with near neighbors to hear and respond to feedback. They asked us to host a meeting of a dozen or so of the immediate neighbors at our office, since the Conservancy had stepped forward to preserve the building.

In the interest of facilitating a discussion about the future of this important property, the Conservancy agreed, with the understanding that it would be an informal discussion and that if they wished to go forward with a project the developers would enter into the full community review process.

As described in the Local, that meeting was attended by so many people in the Conservancy's historic building that our floor moved by about ¼ inch under the weight of the crowd – seemingly dramatic but actually minor. With gratitude to all who have expressed concern, a structural engineer has confirmed that there was no threat and the shift can easily be fixed.

To be clear, the Conservancy did not call the neighbors' meeting, and does not consider it to be our role at this point to publicly choose a side in support or opposition of what we understand is an early-stage concept. Rather, the organization wishes to continue to facilitate discussions that would result in the preservation and adaptive reuse of the historic mansion, and a development project in the adjacent lot that is consistent with the character of the area. We hope that once a project is ready for the formal review process by the community's Registered Community Organizations (CHCA's Land Use Planning & Zoning Committee and the Conservancy's Historic District Advisory Committee, both part of the Chestnut Hill Development Review process), the project will be one that the Conservancy and the neighbors will formally support.

We are hopeful that the developers and their representatives will respond to the concerns and suggestions heard at last week's neighbors' meeting, and that they will hold another meeting with neighbors. We also hope that the neighbors will continue to provide feedback to achieve a new development that balances scale and materials with the need to provide sufficient resources to undertake the renovation. While we would be happy to attend any future meetings, however, we would ask that it be held in a building with greater crowd capacity!

We welcome to visit our website our website at chconservancy.org or call 215-247-9329 with any questions or comments.