

## Condo planned behind historic Rex Ave. house

Posted on April 4, 2018 (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2018/04/04/condo-planned-behind-historic-rex-ave-house/>) by Sue Ann Rybak (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/sue-ann-rybak/>)



([http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Story\\_Condos.crop\\_.jpg](http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Story_Condos.crop_.jpg))

*This architect's rendering shows the proposed new condo unit to the right and behind the historic Duhring house (green structure.)*

**by Sue Ann Rybak**

Guy Laren, of Constellar Corporation, a property management firm, has proposed building a four-story condominium complex on the lot adjacent to the former home of noted architect H. Louis Duhring Jr. at 208-210 Rex Ave. in Chestnut Hill.

Duhring, who died in 1953, designed many of the Hill homes George Woodward commissioned in the early part of the 20th century.

Constellar Corporation has been around for nearly 40 years and was recently in the news for stopping the demolition of and converting a Frank Furness-designed church at 47th and Kingessing Avenue into 21 loft apartments.

The condominiums, which would be built near the Chestnut Hill West Train Station, were designed by Runyan & Associates Architects, 8511 Germantown Ave. in Chestnut Hill. According to the architectural designs, the 49,160-square-foot building would house 17 condos that would range in size from 1,440 square feet to 3,160 square feet. The building would include a green roof and 16 indoor parking spaces.

The proposed development would be built next to and behind the Duhring house. The house, which was originally built for Philadelphia attorney William L. Hirst between 1857 and 1860, is currently not registered as historic. The Chestnut Hill Conservancy, however, nominated the building last year.

A meeting regarding the property was held at the Chestnut Hill Conservancy's offices on Tuesday, March 27. Lori Salganicoff, executive director of the conservancy, said the developers approached her about using the space to have an informal discussion with near neighbors. She was shocked when 65 people showed up for the meeting.

Chestnut Hill resident Hugh Gilmore, a Local columnist, attended the meeting. In an email, he described it "as very uncomfortable." Despite the accommodations, he said "the crowd was calm and patient, though waiting to hear" details about the proposed development.

In the email he said, "But after the lawyer spoke for five minutes to introduce the proposed builders ... there was a loud crack and thud." He added that "it was said that part of the floor caved in at one of the rear corners. Then, someone said 'we should all leave, that the building was compromised and for safety sake we should have another meeting, and all get out of there.'"

Chestnut Hill resident Jeff Gelles also attended the meeting, but "missed a large chunk of the meeting because of the floor collapse," he wrote in an email.

He returned later and stood outside the door once he realized the developers weren't going to cancel the meeting.

"I am trusting Lori's promise that I'll get a second chance, in a safe and sufficiently large space, to see the whole presentation," Gelles said. When asked about the neighbors' reaction to the proposal, he replied, "While I can't speak for anyone but myself, I think it's fair to say many neighbors are deeply skeptical about the wisdom of such a large-scale development on the property."

Salganicoff said in a telephone interview on Tuesday morning, that the conservancy had an engineer come out and evaluate the building. She said the engineer confirmed there was no structural damage to the building. It was just "overwhelmed" by the amount of people who turned out for the meeting.

Initially, she said developers planned to reschedule the meeting, but when what she called "a vast majority" of the group (approximately 50 people) remained, they decided to hold the meeting, anyway.

On the subject of the development, Salganicoff said she and the conservancy are open to the apartment building proposal.

"[Chestnut Hill is fortunate to have] 'this [the historic house] extraordinary resource and we want to protect it and recognize new uses for historical properties,'" she said. She added that there needs to be greater incentives for adaptive use and policies in place to regulate new development.

"The Chestnut Hill Conservancy hopes the developers will take the comments of the neighbors and the issues with developing this site seriously and then come back and host a public meeting," she said

Joyce Lenhardt, of Lenhardt Rodgers Architecture+Interiors, a Chestnut Hill Community Association board member and longtime member of its Land Use Planning and Zoning Committee, said she was, in general, open to the proposal as well.

"In general, I support alternative uses that preserve existing historic resources in our community as an alternative to demolition," she said. "Those resources in many cases, include the buildings and the land around them. It sounds like the developer intends to preserve the existing house, which is positive. Without seeing the proposal, I cannot speak for the new construction. Nor for parking, storm water and steep slope concerns, which would certainly need to be addressed appropriately while still preserving the site."

When asked about the recent boom in construction, Lenhardt said, "Obviously, Chestnut Hill is a desirable place to live – and because the minimum lot sizes in Philadelphia are so small, there is space to squeeze in more units without triggering the need for zoning variances. This is the case at Ardleigh Street, Gravers Lane, East Evergreen Street and Chestnut Hill Avenue – and other places as well.

"Ideally, Chestnut Hill will find a way to protect what we have and provide for appropriate growth. Some increased density in the right places is good – it helps support community and the business district. However, it needs to be done sensitively – and without destroying our historic resources. Destruction is not just demolition, it is changing the patterns and spacing of buildings, removing heritage trees, adding buildings that don't respect the historic architecture. We have something very special here and sometimes it is hard to define – which makes it hard to protect."

This entry was posted in Featured Post (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/category/featurepost/>), News (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/category/news/>) and tagged News (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/tag/news/>). Bookmark the permalink (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2018/04/04/condo-planned-behind-historic-rex-ave-house/>).

← Clover Market makes its return to Chestnut Hill on Sunday, April 8, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., rain or shine. (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2018/04/04/clover-market-makes-its-return-to-chestnut-hill-on-sunday-april-8-from-10-a-m-to-4-p-m-rain-or-shine/>)

o: Marguerite E. Ferrino, volunteer → (<http://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2018/04/04/marguerite-e-ferrino-volunteer/>)