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## Neighbors oppose scope and scale of Rex Avenue development plan

Posted on January 15, 2020 (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/01/15/neighbors-oppose-scope-and-scale-of-rex-avenue-development-plan/>), updated on January 15, 2020

(<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/2020/01/15/neighbors-oppose-scope-and-scale-of-rex-avenue-development-plan/>) by Contributor (<https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/author/contributor/>)



Neighbors are opposed to a planned development at 208-210 Rex Avenue that will preserve the historic home but add town houses that neighbors believe will be out of character for the neighborhood. (Photo by Brendan Sample)

**By Kate Dolan**

The most recent plan for the development of 208-210 Rex Ave. and the renovation of its historically significant house was met with opposition by community members who argued the plan puts the neighborhood's character at risk.

"Too much, too massive, too tall," said Rex Avenue Neighbors Association President Jeff Gelles at the Chestnut Hill Community Association's Land Use Planning and Zoning meeting held on Thursday, Jan. 9.

Chris Young and Fred Duhling of the Camfred Group, a real estate development and management company, and architect Cecil Baker presented for review and feedback a preliminary plan to the LUPZ committee and approximately 27 Chestnut Hill neighbors.

The preliminary design, which was presented with digital images, includes an "elaborate renovation of the existing mansion," according to Young. The house was built in 1860 and is owned by the Baltzell family. Its nomination to the Philadelphia Register of Historic

Places as a historic building by the Chestnut Hill Conservancy in 2017 is still under review.

"There are so many beautiful mansions in Chestnut Hill," Baker said. "How do I create something that helps retention of a historical structure yet gives the developer enough economic wherewithal to keep that structure?"

The plan would divide the mansion into four bi-level units with a shared central elevator. On the remainder of the property, four twins would be built along with a private driveway with ample room for firetruck access. The homes would be three and four stories and none would exceed 38 feet above grade.

The property is zoned as RSD-3, which accommodates single-family detached homes. Among the anticipated variances the proposed plan would require from the Zoning Board of Adjustment are semi-detached vs. detached homes, multi-family use and parking in the side yard.

In the spring of 2018, the community opposed a proposal for a 12-unit condominium development for the property and followed up by establishing the Rex Neighbors Association. The group hired legal representation to carry out discussions with the current developers. Their attorney, Michael Sklaroff, said he had met with Camfred Group in an "effort to find common ground," while also seeing that the zoning process "that is meant to protect the neighborhood" is followed.

"RSD-3 is there for a reason," Sklaroff said. "Government zoning is important to the integrity of the community."

Neighbors voiced concerns over parking, cost transparency, maintaining the warmth and welcoming feel of the street, and whether the buildings would be too tall, for the scale of the neighborhood.

"It's not about constraining developer profits," Andy Cohen, an immediate neighbor said regarding the RSD-3 zoning designation. "It's about preserving the character of the community."

"We are in favor of good smart development on this site," he added. "Zoning guides that. We would love for a developer to work within that zoning."

LUPZ chair Larry McEwen encouraged attendees to consider the financial costs of historic preservation and how that investment can be offset. Variances are sometimes necessary, he said.

"You have to recognize that the easy way out would be to tear this house down and build something else," McEwen said. "History evolves every day; we're making it every day as we go."

Neighbors also suggested that to better evaluate the plan, more detailed plans, showing scale and more context, should be presented. Baker reminded the group several times that the plans were preliminary.

The developer has not filed his plans with the city and will be meeting with neighbors to discuss the plans further. The proposal is not the subject of any upcoming scheduled meetings.

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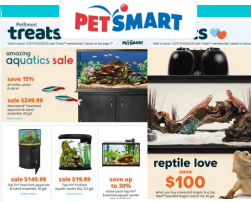
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