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DRC forms committee to refine 30 W. Highland project



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An architect's rendering of townhomes planned for 30 W. Highland Ave. A committee will be formed to work out differences between the developer and neighbors who want to see the current property preserved and are concerned about the density and design of the project.

Posted Wednesday, February 24, 2021 10:03 am

by DB Fromm

Last Tuesday evening, Feb. 16, the Chestnut Hill Community Association's Development Review Committee (CHCA DRC) voted over Zoom to form an ad-hoc committee to resolve design questions around the proposed townhouse development at 30 W. Highland Ave., including whether the existing historic building should be preserved. The committee, composed of CHCA committee members and near-neighbors, will work with the project proponent and architect over the course of a month and present a recommendation to the CHCA Board in March.

The proposal, by E.B. O'Reilly and Associates President Henry O'Reilly, was denied a permit by the City for nonconformance to the lot's current zoning use and building restrictions. O'Reilly appealed to the Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA) for a variance, with a hearing scheduled for late April. According to the City Zoning Code, he must first obtain a recommendation from the CHCA, the neighborhood's Registered Community Organization. The ZBA ordinarily defers to RCO recommendations.

The DRC, itself a CHCA subcommittee, considers recommendations from the Streetscape, Historic District Advisory (HDAC,) and Land Use Planning and Zoning (LUPZ) Committees before making a recommendation to the CHCA Board of Directors, which makes the recommendation for approval or not. Each subcommittee has a seat on the DRC.

Discussion began with a presentation by the architect, Lawrence McEwen, who explained why they felt a suitable plan could not be found while preserving the historic building. Foremost among the challenges were a difficulty in creating parking for the rear-most townhouse and inadequate fire hose access to separate twin townhouses behind neighboring W. Highland rowhomes.

Janet Albaum (herself a Highland Ave. neighbor) relayed the Streetscape committee's endorsement, provided certain signage, lighting, tree and materials stipulations are satisfied: the project shouldn't feature external signage - such as a bespoke name, other than the address; external lighting is for safety only, including lanterns or similar fixtures on each party wall between the townhouses; internal lighting will be blocked from spilling onto the sidewalk or into other residential buildings; a minimum of 12 mature trees will be planted on the property; it will be verified that the existing large tree slated for removal is not a heritage tree; and the color of the Roman brick shall be similar to that used in nearby buildings.

Patricia Cove, representing the HDAC, expressed appreciation for the time put into the proposal; but also concern for a perceived lack of engagement with Highland Ave. neighbors, the massing and scale of the project, and an unsatisfied request to include a public space benefiting the community. A back-and-forth with O'Reilly and his architect resulted in some refinement, but not enough to compensate for the loss of a historic building.

"We especially feel," she read from the HDAC resolution, "that we have not been convinced that the historic building has to be demolished. If that building were to be lost, we fear the consequential precedent it would set for any other development project that would involve the loss of an historic structure."

"As a National Historic District," she said, "we have a responsibility to preserve and maintain the historic structures that enable that designation. We sincerely feel that the loss of this building, combined with the magnitude of the development being proposed would indelibly mark the historic character of the street, as well as the community."



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In recognition of the importance of presenting a unified position to the City, and apparently noting Streetscape and LUPZ support for the project, HDAC proposed an ad-hoc committee be formed to reach consensus. Such a procedure has been implemented in the past, for example in planning for the “One West” development.

LUPZ member Jean McCoubrey read their motion to support the project with the non-mandatory design modifications (which this paper reported last week,) and endorsed their suggestion of an ad-hoc committee, adding the project might also be required to establish a covenant with the CHCA for ongoing maintenance, which would be attached to the deed, another tool the CHCA has used in the past.

Presented with the possibility of further consultation, O'Reilly emphasized the process already undertaken and openness to further discussion, but, he said, “I would ask that we all have an open mind,” and “if we do agree to continue the meetings and discussions that we at least have some kind of timeframe and agenda, because... it's a hardship if the timeframe just keeps dragging on and on.”

After many thoughtful comments by committee members and interested neighbors in attendance, both critical and in support, the DRC took up the HDAC motion to form a committee. The committee will be composed of three CHCA committee members, preferably from the LUPZ, three representatives from the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, and three neighbors from the block or adjacent block.

Comments