

For Conservation Integrity, Process Should Be Trusted

Op-ed Submitted to the Chestnut Hill Local for the Wednesday, February 14th Edition

The historic Greylock Mansion is not new to controversy over proposed development plans. While some argue that these preliminary plans violate certain conservation and preservation easements, the issues specific to Greylock are complex and vulnerable to misconception and mischaracterizations.

Chestnut Hill's historical and cultural interest, architecture, accessibility, and community involvement are nationally renowned. We all share in the efforts that have helped earn the many notable recognitions. The discourse surrounding Greylock demonstrates our passionate commitment.

For more than 55 years, the Chestnut Hill Conservancy has been dedicated to conserving and preserving the historical and natural assets of the community. One of only 436 land trusts in the country, the Conservancy is the first urban accredited trust and is nationally recognized for meeting quality standards. As the holder of 52 conservation easements, the Conservancy takes a careful approach to the challenges of expending resources to maintain properties without guarantee of reimbursement from owners and at risk of costly litigation to enforce owner restrictions.

Over the years, the Conservancy has scrutinized at least a dozen varied Greylock development proposals for compliance with the easements and gave feedback throughout. If the applicant and/or property owner made decisions about whether to proceed. None decided to proceed. The current property owner's proposal is the latest made to the Conservancy's Conservation and Easements Committee (CEC), a joint committee of the Conservancy and the Friends of the Wissahickon.

The CEC reviewed the project in 2022 and, seeing a potential path forward, gave "conceptual approval." The presented plans did not provide enough information, including conservation measures to balance what has been requested, for the Conservancy to approve easement amendments.

Whether the current proposal advances remains to be seen, as the owner needs zoning variances to proceed. According to the procedures, any amendments to the conservation and preservation easements must result in equal or greater conservation value and must not have a private benefit that outweighs the public benefit. When the owner receives final approval from the Zoning Board of Adjustment (ZBA), the CEC will conduct its review of the project and make a recommendation to the Conservancy's Board of Directors concerning any amendments to the easements. If the Board approves the amendments, the Conservancy must obtain consent from Orphans' Court before amending any easements.

No formal review of potential amendments has begun, nor will the Conservancy participate in the public review process involving the Registered Community Organizations and the ZBA. Without all the necessary information, weighing in now could unintentionally adversely impact the conservation objectives. The process provides for systematic checks and balances and will determine if the proposal moves forward. Any amendment considered by the Conservancy must be consistent with the easements' objectives and the Conservancy's Easement Amendment Policy.

Let's work to find a positive and sustainable result for Greylock. Together, we can preserve Chestnut Hill's beauty, historical integrity, and environmental health through civil discourse, respectful disagreement, and thoughtful discernment, as we have done for 57 years.

Eileen Javers
President, Board of Directors
Chestnut Hill Conservancy