

GUEST VIEW

Existing welcome center plan is far superior to 'alternatives'

By Donald O. Ross

As chairman of the board of The Preservation Society of Newport County, I would like to respond to the serious concerns people throughout our community have expressed to us regarding the unacceptable proposal by Ronald Lee Fleming for an alternative approach to a Breakers welcome center (Guest View, Oct. 2).

The plan proposed by Fleming, Mohamad Farzan and a committee of unnamed parties is for a very large and boldly visible series of structures across from The Breakers property incorporating a multi-tiered parking garage, separate facilities for ticketing and orientation and, no doubt, Fleming's beloved four-star restaurant. To make way for these structures, Fleming proposes that the Preservation Society take over Salve Regina's land and demolish unidentified Salve property.

We believe introducing a parking deck and restaurant in the Ochre Point neighborhood makes no sense. This scheme is far more commercial than anything envisioned by our trustees. And I want to assure our good friends at Salve that we have no designs on their property.

In contrast to Fleming's suggestions, our plan — approved by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission — is simple, non-intrusive and preservation-sensitive. We intend to provide sophisticated services to our 400,000 annual visitors in a small structure that cannot be seen from the street nor from The Breakers itself, and which will replace the seasonal structure that is currently there. It will be in the form of a lovely conservatory, and consistent with visitor services offered at the world's leading museums.

Our commitment from the start more than a decade ago has been to minimize the impact on The Breakers property, on the historic vista one experiences approaching the dramatic front gates, and on the character of the neighborhood. By contrast, Farzan's architectural drawing clearly illustrates how intrusive and inappropriate Fleming's additions would be.

During his previous service on the Preservation Society's board, Fleming often argued in favor of a large "fourstar" restaurant. But the board has explicitly stated that it will not enter the restaurant business, and concluded that a small, discreet guest services building is all that is necessary and would have the least imposition on the site. This approach was validated by the state historic commission when it ruled: "The proposed welcome center can be developed in such a way that it does not cause adverse effect on the historic Breakers property."

Fleming casually dismisses the prohibitive costs of his proposal, but he should remember that the Preservation Society has other important funding initiatives ahead of it. Our wonderful supporters have already contributed close to \$3.5 million, about 83 percent of the cost of the welcome center. Knowing these donors as we do, we suspect they would rather fund the beautiful building designed by Epstein Joslin than a parking garage and full-scale restaurant.

Finally, the National Park Service has made it clear that the suggestion of gutting the caretaker's cottage — itself an important historic artifact — is equally unacceptable.

More than 100 community leaders and professionals participated in developing the welcome center plan. It has been presented publicly on more than 60 occasions, and we met seven times over a year with leaders of the Bellevue-Ochre Point Neighborhood Association to review the planning prior to our public announcement. This good-faith deliberation was consistent with a pact we entered into with the neighborhood association. Sadly, our open approach has not been reciprocated. We first learned of the association's opposition to our plans through a letter to The Newport Daily News. Not once was concern expressed directly to us. And our repeated requests to meet with the association's board and/or its membership have been refused.

There is strong, wide-ranging public support from our members and the community for the present proposal. Stephanie Meeks, head of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, Charles Birnbaum, one of the nation's experts on historic landscapes and head of The Cultural Landscape Foundation, and dozens more preservation, tourism, political, business

and museum leaders also support our plan.

In light of the state approval and local denial of our proposal, we are caught between two historic preservation bodies — both looking at the same design and criteria but reaching opposite conclusions. That’s why we are appealing the Newport Historic District Commission’s 4-3 ruling against the welcome center.

I have great faith in the strategic judgment of our intelligent, Newport-centric, experience-diverse board of trustees. These dedicated individuals take their pledge to preserve, protect and present Newport’s historic properties very seriously, and understand the critical importance of the visitor to our area’s prosperity. We are confident that much-needed improvements to the visitor experience can be made while doing no harm to The Breakers property or the wonderful neighborhood that surrounds it.

Donald O. Ross is chairman of the board of The Preservation Society of Newport County.



Epstein Joslin Architects

An architectural rendering depicts the proposed welcome center and improved landscaping at The Breakers mansion in Newport. The Preservation Society of Newport County commissioned the plan.



Under the Preservation Society's plan, The Breakers ticket booth, right, would be removed and the original landscape repaired.



The existing portable toilets at The Breakers would be replaced with better, more accessible amenities.

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