

# OPINION

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GUEST VIEW

## Vanderbilt criticism unjustified

### Preservation Society remains true to its mission of stewardship

By Donald O. Ross

Recent correspondence from some Vanderbilt descendants which was reported in The Newport Daily News is intended, once again, to prevent the Preservation Society of Newport County from completing The Breakers welcome center. The letter is rife with inaccuracies. I would like to address the most significant.

The letter claims that the family donated The Breakers to the Preservation Society. In fact, members of the family sold the house to the society in 1972 for a premium price, with no restrictions, pledges, promises or rights to continued occupancy. Similarly, the recent "transfer" of a major portrait to the Preservation Society was in fact a sale at fair market value.

The claim that the Preservation Society is "exploiting" The Breakers for financial gain demonstrates a total lack of understanding as to how the maintenance of historic properties is funded. Further, when The Breakers was first opened to the public, ticket proceeds were directed by the owner to be used by the Preservation Society for assisting

and preserving other properties.

The letter alleges that the proposed welcome center will degrade the historic landscape. That claim has already been considered and dismissed by all of the relevant regulatory agencies. The Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission found that "the project will not alter the historic character of The Breakers."

The work on the front lawn of The Breakers last summer to prevent the continued deterioration of a unique historic structure — the underground boiler room — also did not alter the landscape. As part of that project, previously damaged sections of fence were removed; they will be replaced after conservation and restoration. Our goal is to eventually open the boiler room for tours.

Some Vanderbilt family members have threatened to recall objects that are on display at The Breakers. Objects on loan from the family may be recalled at any time, but the visitor experience and the interpretation of the building are not at risk. More than 93 percent of the objects at The Breakers are owned by the Preservation Society.

The family has threatened to withhold financial support, but only eight of the 21 signers of the letter have financially supported the society's work over the past 20 years, and in the past five years their charitable giving has been nominal. This compares with the \$5.2 million a year our museum guests contribute by visiting The Breakers. The welcome center is planned for our museum guests' education, convenience and welfare.

The Vanderbilt family has no role in the management or stewardship of The Breakers. It is a museum and a National Historic Landmark, governed by its very able board of trustees and maintained by the society to the highest standards of the museum field, as attested by the fact that the society is accredited by the American Alliance of Museums. Necessary work to sustain our mission to protect, preserve and present Newport's and America's history will continue, and we gratefully acknowledge the outpouring of public support for that mission.

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