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TOURISM

# Breakers' welcome center earns preliminary approval



THE PROPOSED WELCOME CENTER on the grounds of The Breakers in Newport received preliminary approval on Wednesday from the R.I. Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission. COURTESY PRESERVATION SOCIETY OF NEWPORT COUNTY AND EPSTEIN JOSLIN ARCHITECTS

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NEWPORT — The Preservation Society of Newport County's Breakers welcome center project received unanimous preliminary approval on Wednesday from the R.I. Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission, the Preservation Society announced Thursday afternoon.

The Heritage Commission, which has surveyed roughly 52,860 historic properties since 1968, said that "the proposed welcome center can be developed in such a way that it does not cause an adverse effect on the Breakers Property."

The commission judged that the proposed architectural designs for the new pavilions — reminiscent of 19th century park pavilions and greenhouses and to be outfitted with "largely transparent walls, curved forms, and complex massing" — were "compatible with the architectural character of The Breakers and its landscape setting."

The Preservation Society plans to build the welcome center on the grounds of The Breakers, the famous Vanderbilt mansion open to the public year-round.

The society appreciates “the thoroughness of the review by the commission and staff and their finding of preliminary approval for The Breakers welcome center,” Donald O. Ross, Preservation Society Board chairman, said in prepared remarks announcing the decision.

The Preservation Society will next submit its final plans, which will contain details such as positioning, scale and landscaping of the pavilions, plant materials and construction mobilization plans affecting the site, among other aspects of the project.

“I think we can move expeditiously to provide the state with very detailed responses to the requests they have made,” Alan Joslin of Cambridge, Mass.-based Epstein Joslin Architects Inc. said in prepared remarks. Joslin is the lead architect of the welcome center project.

The Heritage Commission recommended the development of a “cultural landscape report,” which is to include a master plan for the total landscape and a strategy for the succession of plant materials. The commission added that the additional information available through landscape archaeology on the garden path would prove useful in future.

“As a former state and federal regulator, I appreciate the detail with which the commission has specified its expectation that all promises made in the conceptual plans will actually come to fruition,” Trudy Coxe, CEO and executive director of the Preservation Society, said in prepared remarks.

The Heritage Commission tempered its assessment with the conclusion that “a return to the original 1896 design for a largely open setting would not be possible without removing many specimen trees.” The Preservation Society has chosen not to pursue this strategy. The project also requires local review.

When the project first came to public attention, some voiced concerns regarding the plans to build the center directly on the grounds of The Breakers, given the historic significance of the property. The Preservation Society and lead architect Joslin, however, said they are confident that the pavilion-style center will be in keeping with the aesthetic and character of the original property.