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OUR VIEW

Breakers plan merits 2nd chance

Instead of going before the Newport Zoning Board of Review based on its merits as part of the city's approval process, it appears a proposed welcome center at The Breakers will be before the board based on an appeal of a decision by the Historic District Commission.

And that's a shame.

The numerous — and everchanging — arguments against the project put up by opponents may have swayed the HDC, which rejected the proposal on a 4-3 vote on Aug. 27, but they have failed to sway us. We can't think of a more appropriate project to improve the visitor experience to Newport's most-toured property — and, by extension, the city itself — than the one proposed by the Preservation Society of Newport County.

The fact the arguments — even those put in writing by city staff and the HDC — keep shifting shows how tenuous they are. Some people seem determined to throw any kind of overblown rationale at the project — for instance, claiming to know what Cornelius Vanderbilt, for whom The Breakers was built in 1895-97, would want for the property today — in order to see it fail.

And that makes us wonder about the motives behind the opposition. Is this really about historic preservation — which requires “common sense,” as Nicholas Brown of Newport, a former preservation professional, said during the last of three HDC hearings on the proposal — or something else?

In a recent letter to the editor of The Daily News, City Councilman Michael T. Farley criticized the Preservation Society for having “resisted efforts to become fuller economic partners with the city.” In the letter, he suggests that as the society reconsiders the welcome center project, it should reconsider some sort of PILOT — or payment in lieu of taxes — agreement with the city.

That seems like a pretty obvious quid pro quo. If this is not about the city wanting more money from the Preservation Society, is there some other political pressure at work here? Or is it a simply matter of ego, a reputation the HDC has suffered from for years?

We can't help but ask these questions, because the arguments being made against the proposal itself just don't hold water.

From focusing on the landscaping and “contributing features” on the property — there are none in the area where the welcome center is proposed to be built, according to the mansion's application to be included on the National Register of Historic Places and named a National

Historic Landmark — to picking apart the materials to be used, including “extensive use of copper,” opponents seem to be missing the point.

The Preservation Society has determined that in order to continue to grow, and to be able to maintain its 11 historic properties on Aquidneck Island, a permanent welcome center is needed to replace a seasonal tent, portable toilets and ticket stand at The Breakers, its most-toured property, with more than 400,000 visitors a year.

What the Preservation Society has proposed, working with Alan Joslin, founding partner of Epstein Joslin Architects — who specializes in civic, higher education and institutional and high-end residential architectural work — is an outstanding example of how a new structure can be carefully designed to blend in with its surroundings.

In the planning process, sensitivity was given not only to the integrity of the property and its showcase historic buildings, but to the surrounding neighborhood.

The Preservation Society is willing to invest \$4.6 million to build a 3,700-square-foot, one-story pavilion that would be hidden in a grove of trees just to the left of the main entrance to The Breakers. It would have modern and accessible restrooms, an area to purchase prepackaged snacks and beverages and interactive information on other attractions in Newport, in addition to other Preservation Society properties. In other words, it would have all the things travelers to other historic sites have come to expect.

The Preservation Society has said it will appeal, and we hope it does. And we hope the Zoning Board will overturn the HDC’s decision.

The Preservation Society deserves support in its mission as much as visitors to The Breakers deserve amenities befitting its Gilded Age glory.

Daily News Publisher William F. Lucey III, a member of the editorial board, is a member of the board of trustees of the Preservation Society of Newport County. The Daily News is one of three Partners in Preservation, the highest level of corporate support for the Preservation Society’s work.
