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BREAKERS WELCOME CENTER

State panel gives OK to project

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

The Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission gave its final approval last week to a proposed welcome center at The Breakers mansion in Newport after making minor adjustments to the center and landscaping plan.

The city's Historic District Commission had the proposal on its agenda Tuesday night, but scheduled special meetings to discuss and debate the plan on Aug. 13, Aug. 15 and Aug. 27, depending on how many hearings are needed to reach a decision.

The Preservation Society of Newport County, which owns The Breakers, is proposing to construct a 3,650-square-foot, one-story pavilion-style building that would replace the current ticket booth, portable toilets, vending machine shed and temporary tent making up the welcoming area to the left of the main entrance.

According to the design plans, the pavilion would be behind the caretaker's cottage at the front gate on Ochre Point Avenue and hidden in an existing grove of trees. Plants, shrubs and trees would be added to the grove so the center would not be visible from the mansion or Ochre Point Avenue.

The size of the pavilion has been reduced slightly because the state historic preservation commission required it to be set back an additional 2 feet from the walkway. Instead of a new wall to the left of the welcome center, there will be a trellis covered in greenery, said Trudy Coxe, executive director of the Preservation Society.

"They had several other good recommendations and this will continue over the coming months," she said.

Edward Sanderson, executive director of the state historic preservation commission, said Karst Hoogeboom, chairman of the commission, would continue to review the landscaping plan as it is developed. Hoogeboom is a landscape architect employed by the National Park Service.

The state commission has review oversight over the plan because The Breakers received a federal grant to fix the roof close to 10 years ago, and the state, which administered the grant, received an easement on the property, Sanderson said.

The commission gave preliminary approval to the welcome center plan in June, but requested additional landscaping details before giving final approval last Wednesday. Sanderson said he would issue a letter of approval in August and the board would vote on the meeting minutes in September.

The project is estimated to cost \$4.2 million.

The Breakers was built in 1893-95 for industrialist Cornelius Vanderbilt II. Famed architect Richard Morris Hunt

PANEL A8

Panel

Continued from A1

designed the mansion in a combination of Beaux-Arts and Renaissance styles.

Because of both its exceptional architecture and its connection to the Vanderbilts, The Breakers was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1971, which currently has 85,014 listings, and became a National Historic Landmark in 1993, of which there are just more than 2,500 in the country, or less than 3 percent of properties on the National Register.

The Breakers attracts about 400,000 visitors a year from around the country and the world, making it the fourth-most-visited museum in New England, surpassed only by three museums in Boston.

In an effort to improve the visitor experience, the Preservation Society hired Epstein Joslin Architects of Cambridge, Mass., with Alan Joslin as the lead architect, to develop the building plan for the welcome center. Reed Hilderbrand of Watertown, Mass., is developing the landscape design.

The American Society of Landscape Architects last month named Reed Hilderbrand as the "2013 Landscape Architecture Firm of the Year," Coxe said.

Despite the acclaim the firm has received, "they are very calm about incorporating others' ideas into the plan," Coxe said. "They are open to landscaping recommendations that are improvements."

Besides the city's Historic District Commission, the city's Planning Board and Zoning Board of Review also must review and approve the plan before it can proceed. The approval process is expected to continue until mid- to late fall. Joslin has said he would like the project to break ground in November; construction would take nine months to a year.

Any changes made to the design by the local boards must come back before the state historic preservation commission for further approval, Sanderson said.

According to the plans, the welcome center plan would have a technologically advanced ticketing center and modern, wheelchair-accessible restrooms. The center would be built to be environmentally friendly, taking advantage of natural light and ocean breezes, although it also would have cooling and heating, allowing it to operate year-round. The copper roof of the center would have an aged green patina when it is installed, allowing it to blend into the surrounding greenery. Joslin has said

the garden-style architecture is inspired by park pavilions and conservatories from the Gilded Age.

Visitors sitting in what is being called the servery, where pre-packaged sandwiches, salads, snacks and non-alcoholic beverages would be available for purchase, would have a view of the ocean to the northeast of the mansion. There would be no kitchen, dishwasher or microwave in the servery, which would be similar to what is available at the teahouse at Marble House or the cafe at The Elms.

The Preservation Society has said people who visit The Breakers tent become interested in the other 10 historic sites the society oversees. Sales of tickets in the tent for those properties, as well as the information available about the other properties, generates an estimated \$1.5 million in additional revenue each year, the society says. The proposal would allow the society to move these operations out of the tent and into a permanent welcome center.

The society as a whole brings in about \$17 million in revenues a year, which the nonprofit organization uses for the operations, exhibits and upkeep of its properties.

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Opponents vote to keep on fighting

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

NEWPORT — As The Breakers welcome center moves through the state and local approval process, the Bellevue Avenue Ochre Point Neighborhood Association has voted to oppose the plan and advocate denial at every governmental level.

It's "great architecture and a fabulous design," said James Moore, president of the neighborhood association. "We just don't like where it is."

Moore and Robert Beaver, the association's vice president, explained their opposition during a recent meeting with The Daily News editorial board. They said they believe no new structure should be built on The Breakers grounds in the interest of preserving the historic integrity of the property.

Architect Richard Morris Hunt designed The Breakers mansion in the late 1800s and the landscape architect for the surrounding grounds was Ernest Bowditch, a student of Central Park designer Frederick Law Olmsted. He worked with his brother James H. Bowditch, a landscape gardener.

The neighborhood association hired Heritage Landscapes LLC of Charlotte, Vt., and Norwalk, Conn., to conduct an assessment of the

Opponents

Continued from A1

landscaping and the possibility of restoring Bowditch's garden design elements.

Patricia M. O'Donnell, the firm's principal, prepared a report that was provided to the Rhode Island Historic Preservation and Heritage Commission when it took up the plan earlier this year.

She recommended denial of the proposed project with the claim that "contemporary facilities should not be placed within the historic property."

"The proposed visitor facilities should be redesigned for a proximate location outside the property fence line so that an authentic Vanderbilt landscape can be restored and presented at this museum property," O'Donnell wrote in the report's summary.

"Based on thorough planning, restore The Breakers historic designed landscape to the character and features of the period of significance, 1893 to 1899, and present an authentic landscape as contributing cultural resource of the property," she recommended.

Moore and Beaver said that Cornelius Vanderbilt II, for whom The Breakers was built, and Bowditch purposely allowed no outlying structures, such as greenhouses or garden pavilions, on the property. The caretaker's cottage on the property line actually was built to hide the smokestacks of the underground power plant.

The state approved the project last week, but as a condition required more landscaping plans and will continue to oversee landscaping details, according to Edward Sanderson, executive director of the historic preservation commission.

The Breakers property is 13 acres and the welcome center, which would be hidden in a grove of trees and plantings, would take up less than

1 percent of that space, said Trudy Coxe, executive director of the Preservation Society of Newport County, which owns The Breakers and is proposing the permanent welcome center.

"Properties mature and trees grow," Coxe said. "There are now 300 trees on the property and they are beautiful. Bushes and flowering plants that may have been there originally wouldn't grow in the shade of the trees. You have to accept what you have on the property. If there is a 110-year-old beech tree, you don't cut it down to get back to the original design."

Best practices for historic landscaping is done through rehabilitation and the Preservation Society has hired a nationally recognized landscape architecture firm to do that, she said.

Darwina Neal, a former chief of cultural resource preservation services for the National Park Service and a World Heritage Site nomination reviewer, wrote the state commission a letter of opposition to the plan.

In 2007, the Newport World Heritage Committee submitted two separate nominations for Newport, one honoring its Colonial heritage, the other focused on its Gilded Age. When a decision was made in January 2008, Newport was not among the 14 U.S. sites selected by the National Park Service to be on the U.S. World Heritage Tentative List.

"Considering that Newport is interested in being designated as a World Heritage Site and may try to be added to the U.S. Tentative List when it reopens, projected for 2014, damage to the historic landscape of The Breakers will be an integrity issue for World Heritage Site consideration," Neal wrote.

But Coxe pointed out the "Colonial Newport and the Lively Experiment" nomination, honoring the city's early history as a center for religious freedom, was put on a

list of sites for future consideration and this secondary list has official status. The "Gilded Age Newport" nomination was not chosen, she said.

The neighborhood association also objects to what is called the "servery" in The Breakers welcome center that will offer pre-packaged sandwiches, snacks and drinks, but not have any facility for preparing foods.

"This is a fundamental decision whether to allow a restaurant to be built on the grounds," Moore said. "Would it be allowed at Astor's Beechwood or Belcourt Castle?"

Such a decision would be precedent-setting, Moore and Beaver argued.

The Preservation Society has countered that no restaurant is planned and that similar refreshments currently are sold in the Tea House at Marble House and at The Elms cafe.

"If it were in an existing building, we would be willing to work with it," Moore said.

The neighborhood association would prefer the Preservation Society to consider alternatives, such as putting up a smaller ticketing building in the parking lot across Ochre Point Avenue from The Breakers, or putting facilities in the site of the underground power plant.

Preservation Society staff have said the parking lot regularly is at capacity during the tourist season and it does not make sense to take away parking. Constructing an underground parking garage there would make it a \$12 million project, diverting funds needed for the continuing maintenance of the historic properties, they say.

The planned 3,650-square-foot Welcome Center, located behind the caretaker's cottage, and the surrounding new landscaping, would cost an estimated \$4.2 million.

The underground boiler room has about 750 square feet of usable space, according to the society.