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Historic District Commission rejects welcome center plan

The Preservation Society of Newport County says it plans to appeal the decision.

By Sean Flynn
Staff writer

The Newport Historic District Commission voted 4-3 Tuesday night to reject a proposal by the Preservation Society of Newport County to construct a 3,650-square-foot welcome

center at The Breakers and rehabilitate the surrounding landscaping.

There was a gasp from the audience when the final "no" vote was cast after 2½ hours of testimony from experts and comments from the audience. All seats on the floor of the council chamber at City Hall and both upstairs galleries were filled with more than 150 people.

In voting against the proposal, HDC Chairman John Shehan said it was the intention of Cornelius Vanderbilt, who built The Breakers between 1893

and 1895, and his landscape architect Ernest Bowditch not to have any buildings on the grounds, except the mansion, the caretaker's cottage and the children's playhouse. Members Theodora Aspegren, Mary Jo Valdes and Michael Conroy also voted against the proposal.

Commission members Daniel Dias, Christopher Fagan and Vincent O'Dwyer voted in favor of the proposal without comment.

The \$4.2 million welcome center was proposed to replace the current

tent, porta-johns and overgrowth in vegetation to the left of the entrance to The Breakers, which Shehan conceded "are in deplorable condition."

The vote is "not an end, but a beginning," Shehan said, adding that the HDC would work with the Preservation Society to come up with an alternative plan.

The Preservation Society agreed that the HDC decision is not an end, but for a different reason. It announced after the vote that it would appeal the decision to the city's Zoning Board

of Appeals, which can overturn HDC decisions.

"The Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission approved this plan, and we believe there are errors in the (city's) findings of fact, which have contributed to the HDC decision," Donald O. Ross, chairman of the Preservation Society's board of directors, said in a prepared statement. "We anticipate the Zoning Board will give our proposal

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an equally rigorous review and that it will affirm our position."

The decision was a victory for the Bellevue Avenue Ochre Point Neighborhood Association, which opposed the Preservation Society's plan.

James Moore, chairman of the association, testified against the proposal at the beginning of Tuesday's meeting and welcomed the decision at the end.

"We're pleased the Historic District Commission voted in the way they did," he said. "They accepted our argument that the vote is not whether the welcome center is appropriate or not, but that it is an inappropriate place to put it on The Breakers' grounds."

Before attorney Turner Scott, representing the neighborhood association, and attorney William Landry, representing the Preservation Society, made closing arguments, about two dozen people from the audience made statements limited to two minutes each. More than 20 were in favor of the Preservation Society's proposal.

Several speakers noted that among the five purposes of the Historic District Commission listed in city ordinances are "strengthen the local economy" and "promote the use of historic districts for the education, pleasure, and welfare of the citizens of the city of Newport."

Besides The Breakers, the Preservation Society owns 10 other historic properties on Aquidneck Island.

Jody Sullivan, executive director of the Newport County Chamber of Commerce, said the Preservation Society is in "a very difficult and tricky balancing act of managing to preserve the integrity and historic value of these properties while creating the revenue stream needed to maintain the very same structures."

Alan Joslin, the lead architect for the welcome center plan, designed a one-story pavilion-style building that would replace an amusement park-style ticket booth, portable toilets, a vending machine shed and a temporary tent, and be hidden in an existing grove

of trees. Plants, shrubs and other trees would be added to the grove so the center would not be visible from the mansion or Ochre Point Avenue. The center would have a technologically advanced ticketing center and modern, wheelchair-accessible restrooms.

"Without the ability to continue to compete in the global hospitality market, the future and continued ability to generate the revenue necessary to preserve these priceless historic properties is at risk and they would inevitably fall into disrepair," Sullivan said.

Landry noted that the "modest building" would occupy "less than one-half of 1 percent" of The Breakers' 13 acres.

Among the few opponents from the audience who spoke was Ronald Dick, a resident of Bellevue Avenue. He said the historic district "has been under the enormous pressure of commercialization. There are always people who are going to want to make it more commercial and sell more tickets.

"It is a beautiful neighborhood and this group (the neighborhood association) is trying to protect it," he said. "I'm on their side."

Ronald Fleming of Bellevue Avenue outlined a series of alternative possible proposals, all locating the proposed visitors center outside the grounds of The Breakers. The parking lot across the street from The Breakers is a favored location of opponents, and Fleming suggested this site as well.

Laurie Baker of Newport told the HDC the Preservation Society is "not taking care of what they have. ... The Elms' gardens are a mess. These houses are falling apart. This is all glory and talk."

Among the many supporters of the proposal who spoke were professional preservationists, including architect John Grosvenor, whose firm is currently restoring the exterior of Astors' Beechwood and redesigning its interior, and Sam Frank, former dean of architecture and design at the Rhode Island School of Design, whose consulting firm helped select the proposed site of the welcome center.

Laurence S. Cutler, who established the National

Museum of American Illustration in Vernon Court on Bellevue Avenue with his wife, Judy Goffman Cutler, pointed out that the Bellevue Avenue Ochre Point Neighborhood Association opposed that museum project in the late 1990s.

"It often lacks due diligence," he said of the neighborhood association.

Cutler, an architect, said the welcome center "is a superbly designed structure. It is appropriately sited and does not interfere with existing structures or the existing landscape."

"I fully support The Breakers welcome center," said Barbara van Beuren, president of the van Beuren Charitable Trust. "The Preservation Society has been a good steward of our architectural treasures."

She urged the HDC to help "create value in historic architecture, not embalm it."

Nicholas Brown of Harrison Avenue said he is a former preservation professional and he supports the plan.

"My family has been in the game a long time," he said. "In preserving the past, we have to look to the future. Use common sense."

Valerie Talmage, executive director of Preserve Rhode Island, also urged the HDC to issue the proposal a certificate of appropriateness.

At the conclusion of the hearing, Landry said the current planted area, the garden walk, and the caretaker's cottage in the northwest quadrant of the property, the site of the proposed center, were not listed as "contributing structures" when The Breakers was named a National Historic Landmark.

"The project site as been changed many times over the decades," he said. "It has the least historic integrity on the property."

But for the HDC majority, Scott had the winning argument in his closing statement.

"Since 1895, there has been no new construction on The Breakers property," he said. "I don't believe this applicant has made a case to disrupt The Breakers and put a welcome center at that location."

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