

Email to Landmarks Commissioners

I am writing to you to express my concern for an issue that is before you, the proposal by Steve Brown Apartments to move the Yeadon-Clarenbach house and to demolish the Smith House and the Highlander Apartment Building. I am not opposed to demolition of the Highlander or moving the Yeadon-Clarenbach house to another site within the Mansion Hill historic district. I am strongly opposed to the demolition of the Smith house and to the construction of three very large residential buildings on the site. I am deeply concerned about the precedent that this project would set that would affect the future of not only Mansion Hill, but also of our other historic districts.

Request for demolition

I believe that our criteria for demolition in Madison's General Ordinances are abundantly clear. Specifically criterion f. - "whether the building or structure is in such deteriorated condition that it is not structurally or economically feasible to preserve or restore it provided that any hardship or difficulty claimed by the owner **which is self-created or which is the result of any failure to maintain the property in good repair cannot qualify** as a basis for the issuance of a Certificate of Appropriateness" (bolding added).

It is eminently clear that the Brown company, who has owned the property for about 20 years, has failed to maintain the property in good repair. At Mr. Brown's request, I and a couple of landmarks commissioners toured the exterior and interior of the building after he stopped using it as a rental property ca. 2003. He asked for this tour because he said he was hoping to be allowed to demolish it. I believe that around that time he also showed us a drawing for a new building at the site. I and the Landmarks Commissioners informally advised Mr. Brown that the building appeared to be structurally sound and recommended that he bring it up to code and repair it for active use.

Since 2003 Mr. Brown has continued to fail to maintain his property and its condition has deteriorated. This is amply demonstrated by building inspection records. Because of this Criterion f. must pertain - since he has failed to maintain for over 10 years at the least, the Landmarks Commission cannot approve demolition based on criterion f.

The Landmarks Commission has recent history in handling demolition by neglect/failure to maintain. The stone and brick Timothy Brown carriage house at 120 E. Gorham Street had fallen into severe disrepair including structural failures. As a garage for a few cars, the building produced little income. The owners had owned the building for decades and applied for a demolition permit. The Landmarks Commission denied the issuance of a demolition permit because the condition of the building was self-created and the owners had failed to keep it in good repair. Despite the fact that restoration was to cost tens of thousands of dollars, the owners proceeded to bring the building up to like-new condition. It will now continue to contribute to the historic character of Mansion Hill for many years to come.

Another pertinent criterion is b: "Whether the building or structure, although not itself a landmark building, contributes to the distinctive architectural or historic character of the District as a whole and therefore should be preserved..." In my opinion, as an expert in historic

preservation and historical architecture (briefly, I have served as the architectural historian for the Wisconsin State Historic Preservation Office, as a member of the Historic Preservation Review Board which considers and approves all National Register nominations from Wisconsin, and have written over 150 National Register and local Landmark nominations for historic districts and individual buildings) the Smith house is a contributing building in Mansion Hill. It is listed as such by the National Register of Historic Places and therefore would be eligible for the rehabilitation tax credits.

Proposal for three new residential buildings

The other most pertinent criterion that pertains to this case is g. - “whether any new structure proposed to be constructed or change in use proposed to be made is compatible with the buildings and environment of the district in which the subject property is located.” The Madison Landmarks Commission has 36 years of determining what is and what is not compatible. While the language in this criterion can be said to be subjective, in practice, both in Madison and in the National Register (which served as a guide for Landmarks Commissions around the country), such determinations are made fairly consistently. The basic intent is for a new building or addition to be of a similar scale to the buildings in its surrounding area (visually related area, another term that has been consistently applied over the years). While the Belmont Hotel and the Winterbotham building are quite different, differing heights is part of the historic character of our downtown. Not so Mansion Hill. Most of the streets are lined with two or three story houses with the occasional small apartment building. I believe there are a couple of five story apartment buildings from the historic era, but their gross volume is many times smaller than the three proposed buildings as are the square footage of their facades.

The Landmarks Commission has a track record of approving new buildings that are similar in height and volume to the historic buildings nearby. An example is the Quisling Clinic project, the initial plans for which were eight stories tall. The Commission wanted the project to be successful, and the developer eventually brought in a proposal for a five-story wing, sufficiently set back from the street so that its visual impact was minimized. That project was approved and built.

The three buildings now proposed would be constructed of high quality materials and would be of a design that mimics an historic building type. But they are simply too massive to in any way be considered compatible and would not be consistent with past decisions. If the current proposal is approved, it will be unfair to past developers and set a precedent for future proposals. Promoting development and the creation of more urban housing are important goals, but not at the expense of Madison’s most precious historic neighborhood.