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# Stop institutional creep on College Hill

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Your grandmother's Thayer Street was laid to rest decades ago. The carriage trade is long gone. Most locally owned shops and eateries have been replaced by chain stores and chain restaurants. Now a luxury apartment complex, proposed by Gilbane Development Co. without the official connivance of Brown University, threatens to destroy the ambience of College Hill, perhaps the most historic neighborhood in Providence.

The 257 Thayer St. project would fill most of the block bounded by Thayer, Meeting, Brook and Euclid streets after nine houses are demolished. Three buildings on that stretch of Thayer would be spared. All the houses are owned by Squires, a local grooming establishment that leases space to small merchants or rents rooms and apartments to Brown students.

Each house contributes to College Hill's historical character, several with considerable panache. The block is zoned for a medium residential density, buffering the neighborhood's wealthier and more stable streets and enclaves from Thayer's noise and bustle.

The complex would have an underground garage and 102 luxury apartments in four stories entered through a lobby facing the corner of Thayer and Euclid. Its mishmash architecture of brick, steel and glass aspires to be edgy but still to fit in. Yawn! It would please nobody except lovers of institutional creep.

The proposal violates size, use and density guidelines in the city's comprehensive plan. So Gilbane has applied for a zoning change — not only for the site itself and a block both north and south of it, but for the blocks to the east between Brook and Hope. Larger retail establishments, including taverns and restaurants now prohibited, would be allowed. Permitted residential density would rise by 600 percent, encouraging more huge projects and putting 20 more old houses in jeopardy. Several of College Hill's most desirable residential streets would be stripped of their buffer zone. With the character of the neighborhood at risk, valuable historic designations could be revoked.

On March 15, the City Plan Commission endorsed the change anyway by 3 to 1. It slapped aside years of citizen participation in the comprehensive plan. If zoning can be so casually overridden, what is its point? It is now up to the City Council to defend local democracy.

Brown, while keeping an arm's length from this project, wants more students to live closer to campus. Supporters argue that higher density promotes a "smart growth" agenda of reducing auto dependency — a fine goal, but dubious in such posh digs. If the goal were more plausible, it would still fail the "at what cost?" test by putting College Hill at risk.

If unchecked, institutional creep could someday tip College Hill into decline. Without a buffer between its quiet streets and the menace of noise, bustle and ugliness, more families might move to the suburbs, and sell their houses to owners who might break them up into apartments, lowering property values, destabilizing the neighborhood and accelerating a downward spiral that had slowed in recent decades.

Adding to the pressure is a city proposal to give two of the loveliest streets on College Hill to Brown. What Brown has already built on the third street in that deal, Olive, bodes poorly for Brown and Benevolent. Yes, amid institutional creep the university has preserved many of its historic properties in recent decades. Yet preservation, vital as it is, merely stabilizes historic fabric. Each new modernist building weakens that fabric. Only new traditional buildings that add to the fabric can turn a tide that continues to overwhelm beauty. This Brown continues to resist, undermining its own brand.

Change, often billed falsely as progress, can have a quietly insidious influence on the character of cities. Even fast change will pace itself slowly in our day-by-day perception. For all the voices raised in defense of College Hill

by its residents, what makes it worth preserving can evaporate before we realize it's gone.

Institutional growth and neighborhood character can no longer co-exist on College Hill. If the line is not drawn here and now, when will it be drawn? By then it may be too late.



***GILBANE DEVELOPMENT CO.***

Proposed luxury apartments at 257 Thayer St., on College Hill in Providence