

# COLLEGE HILL NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION & PROVIDENCE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## Thayer Street District Study Steering Committee

### Overview

**History:** In March 2012, Gilbane Development Company presented plans for a proposed student apartment building at 257 Thayer Street to both the College Hill Neighborhood Association (CHNA) and the Providence Preservation Society (PPS). The proposed building would occupy the majority of the block bounded by Thayer, Euclid, Brook, and Meeting Streets. The site for the proposal currently consists of nine houses in the College Hill Historic District, listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Following Gilbane's initial presentations, both the CHNA and PPS responded with appeals to extend the project's timeline, make improvements to the design by collaborating with a locally sensitive architect, and consider the means for preservation while examining the potential impact on the surrounding neighborhood (pgs. 4-7). PPS also volunteered to act as facilitator with stakeholders involved in the future development of this three block area, including CHNA.

In April, following a public meeting to discuss the proposal, Councilman Sam Zurier asked CHNA and PPS to form a Steering Committee comprised of members of both organizations to discuss and evaluate community concerns regarding the proposed 257 Thayer Street development. This group was kept intentionally small, with representation of different points of view, and relevant knowledge and experience exhibited among the members. The committee members are as follows:

Arria Bilodeau, Sara Bradford, Josh Eisen, Barry Fain, James Hall, Warren Jagger, Michael McCormick, Lucie Searle, Sam Shamoon, Allison Spooner, Mark Van Noppen, Mack Woodward, and Mark Zarrillo.

For a timeline of the Gilbane's proposal, see pg. 3.

**Mission:** The goal of the Committee is to examine whether it is possible for change to happen on the proposed site that both organizations can support. As part of this goal, the Committee has worked to develop outlines of changes necessary for the project to be worthy of consideration.

**Progress:** Gilbane has employed the services of local architects, specifically founder Don Powers and partner Douglas Kallfelz of Union Studio. They have revised the original designs for the 257 Thayer Street proposal, to one that breaks down the mass of the structure and includes a courtyard accessible via Brook Street (pg. 8).

On Tuesday June 26th, the City Council Ordinance Committee heard public comment concerning the proposed changes to the comprehensive plan and zoning ordinance triggered by the 257 Thayer Street proposal. At the hearing, the Planning Department presented revisions to both the plan and

the ordinance based on the work performed by Sam Shamoan, who has been advising Councilman Sam Zurier on the project. These revisions were a product of discussions among the steering committee. The changes were designed to place tighter limits on what types of development can occur in the parcel in question, as well as in the surrounding area.

The Committee has produced two documents addressing this proposal (pgs. 9-11). One document provides the checklist that had been requested by Councilman Zurier and submitted to Robert Gilbane. The second document outlines the elements of a planning process that should be considered moving forward to preserve the character of the greater Thayer Street area. A meeting for the public to hear directly from members of the Steering Committee has also been scheduled at the Central Congregational Church (296 Angell Street) at 6:30 pm on Monday, July 16<sup>th</sup>.

**Checklist:** Currently, Robert Gilbane of Gilbane Development Company is reviewing the checklist. Responses will be disseminated once they are received.

**Informational Public Meeting:** An informational meeting will be held by the Steering Committee on Monday, July 16, at the Central Congregational Church (296 Angell Street) at 6:30 pm to reiterate the findings of the group to the public. A Q&A session will be offered for those who have questions regarding the work done by the Steering Committee, the proposal for 257 Thayer Street, and discussion of future planning for the Thayer Street District.

**Future Plan:** While examining this project, the Committee recognized that over the past 30 years, this area has transitioned from a neighborhood of largely single-family residences to one dominated by houses with multiple student housing units. Restricting comments to the 257 Thayer Street proposal was not addressing larger issues facing this neighborhood. As such a plan was established for proactive management of the future of the entire Thayer Street District from Bowen to Angell between Brook and Thayer. The plan would be managed by a new Steering Committee that would operate with the support of the Providence Planning Department and Brown University. The Committee members would also include local shareholders such as CHNA, PPS, and the Thayer Street District Management Authority. This plan would establish a process for approval of new projects that is predictable for developers, property owners, business owners, and neighbors.

You may find additional information on the 257 Thayer Street project on Councilman Zurier's website (<http://www.samzurier.com/>) as well.

## 257 Thayer Street Proposal Timeline

- March 5, 2012** - Gilbane Development Company presents to CHNA at Lippitt House
- March 14, 2012** - Gilbane presents 257 Thayer Proposal to PPS Planning and Architectural Review Committee
- April 9, 2012** - Councilman Sam Zurier holds a public discussion at Hope High School to discuss project.
- April 10, 2012** - Gilbane presents revised plans to College Hill Neighborhood Association at Lippitt House.
- April 11, 2012** - Gilbane presents revised plans to PPS Planning and Architectural Review Committee
- April 17, 2012** - PPS releases response letter to Gilbane proposal (pg. 4)
- April 18, 2012** - CHNA releases response letter to Gilbane proposal (pg. 6)
- April 24, 2012** - Zoning and Comprehensive Plan amendments relating to 257 Thayer Street Project reviewed by City Plan Commission.
- May, 2012** - Gilbane engages Union Studio to revise designs.
- May 15, 2012** - Zoning and Comprehensive Plan amendments relating to 257 Thayer Street Project reviewed by City Plan Commission.
- May 22, 2012** - Steering Committee Meeting 1
- June 7, 2012** - Steering Committee Meeting 2
- June 13, 2012** - Steering Committee Meeting 3
- June 21, 2012** - Steering Committee Meeting 4 (Planning Outline and Development Checklist formed)
- June 26, 2012** – Providence City Council Committee on Ordinances public hearing for Comprehensive Plan and Zoning amendments relating to 257 Thayer Street Proposal

# Providence Preservation Society

April 17, 2012

Robert V. Gilbane  
Chairman and CEO  
Gilbane Development Company  
7 Jackson Walkway  
Providence, RI 02903

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James Brayton Hall  
*Executive Director*

Dear Mr. Gilbane:

Thank you for discussing Gilbane Development Company's plans for 257 Thayer Street at the March 14 and April 11 meetings of the Providence Preservation Society's Planning, Architectural Review, and Marker Committee. We greatly appreciate your efforts to provide us with an opportunity to comment on the proposal. Gilbane's willingness to meet with the preservation community and neighborhood groups underscores your commitment to community engagement. Having reviewed the plans for the site along with your presentations, this letter serves as a summary of the Providence Preservation Society's (PPS) thoughts regarding the proposal.

PPS applauds your efforts to plan a building that responds to the economic and cultural demands of the immediate area surrounding 257 Thayer Street. However, the project raises a number of questions and issues that PPS believes need additional thought and exploration.

For PPS, the greatest impediment to this project is the proposed demolition of nine historic houses that contribute to the character, history, and scale of a district on the National Register of Historic Places. PPS does not support the loss of historic fabric. The 2009 *College Hill, Wayland & Fox Point Neighborhood Plan* indicates that the College Hill community has a strong commitment to preservation of their historic building fabric, with a specific goal to, "Prevent or minimize the demolition of historic properties" (*College Hill, Wayland & Fox Point Neighborhood Plan*, pg. 24). The proposal for 257 Thayer Street would entail the demolition of nine contributing structures within the College Hill Historic District, listed in the National Register of Historic Places. The built environment of this community reflects the growth of a burgeoning professional class that made Providence one of the most prosperous and affluent communities in the country during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The loss of these buildings would profoundly change the appearance of this portion of the neighborhood. While PPS understands that it is unlikely these houses may ever return to single-family use, as preservationists we believe the urban fabric should ideally reflect a community's history and contribute to a "sense of place."

As presented, Gilbane's proposal for 257 Thayer Street calls for the permitting process to begin as soon as possible in order to have the building complete by August 2014. This timeframe is too short to allow for the careful consideration that a proposal of this magnitude deserves. PPS urges that the Gilbane project schedule be extended to allow for additional planning and discovery of achievable preservation alternatives that would strengthen the residential edges surrounding this three block area. This process should consider the possible relocation of specific buildings proposed for demolition.

While considering the Gilbane proposal, PPS must also factor in the strong likelihood of the development of a hotel along Brook Street and a Brown University student

housing project at the northwest corner of Brook Street and Cushing Street. Were all three projects to proceed, as many as twenty historic structures could be lost. By extending the project's timetable, the owners of all three blocks could consider the neighborhood holistically along with PPS and community stakeholders. PPS would be glad to act as facilitator.

Should construction move forward, PPS believes the building design must be the best possible model for such a large scale replacement of the historic fabric of this site.

Its design, structure and materials should signify that Providence's good built structures merit replacement only by as good or better construction and design. If the existing buildings are demolished, any new design should be worthy of that specific location. An appropriate building for the site must reflect thoughtful orientation and show consideration of the community's local character. Thus far, progress in design proposals has consisted mainly of changes to surface decorations. PPS strongly suggests Gilbane engage the services of an architect with a distinguished record of design excellence within the context of this type of historic, residential built environment.

To summarize our position, PPS suggests the following:

1. Preservation: Gilbane take steps to mitigate the loss of nine houses contributing to the College Hill Historic District, on the National Register of Historic Places.
2. Timetable: The project's timetable be extended to allow for additional planning and input.
3. Neighborhood Development: PPS act as facilitator with stakeholders involved in the future development of this three block area, including the College Hill Neighborhood Association and the Wheeler School.
4. Model for excellence: Gilbane engage the services of an architect with a demonstrated record of design distinction, utilizing excellent structural elements and materials, within the context of this type of historic and residential built environment.

We appreciate your time and commitment to finding the best possible treatment for these sites and look forward to continuing this dialogue. We thank you for the opportunity to comment.


Sincerely,




Lucie Searle  
Board President



James Brayton Hall,  
Executive Director



Arria Bilodeau  
Planning, Architectural Review & Marker Committee Co-Chair



W<sup>m</sup> McKenzie Woodward  
Planning, Architectural Review & Marker Committee Co- Chair

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Providence City Council, City Hall  
Councilman Sam Zurier  
25 Dorrance Street, Room 310  
Providence, RI 02903

April 18, 2012

Dear Councilman Zurier,

The College Hill Neighborhood Association (CHNA) Board of Directors has formed a response regarding the 257 Thayer Street Gilbane Development Company proposal. After reviewing materials from the developer, feedback from residents, and discussions with various stakeholders, the CHNA Board of Directors has determined that there has not been sufficient time or adequate materials available for the CHNA Board of Directors to be able to clearly endorse or oppose the proposed 257 Thayer Street student residence project. The CHNA Board of Directors has therefore voted unanimously to abstain from voting directly on this project. It is our intent, moving forward, to be proactive in our approach and collaborate effectively to preserve the best interest of the residents of College Hill and the greater community.

The College Hill Neighborhood Association Board of Directors has voted unanimously to provide the City Council and the Providence City Planning Department the following recommendations for the 257 Thayer Street / Gilbane Development Company proposal or any other high-density development project proposed for this area going forward.

- 1. Slow down the process.** The city recently finalized a long-term comprehensive plan and a neighborhood plan, both of which were developed with extensive participation from residents of the affected areas. Any major zoning changes that affect density as greatly as the proposed project should go back to the residents through a charrette to determine if such zoning changes would be to the benefit of the community.
- 2. Consider multiple projects together.** The proposed zoning change for the 257 Thayer Street apartment building should be considered in conjunction with the hotel and dorm proposed for neighboring blocks since they would greatly affect each other's design, scale and impact on the surrounding neighborhood. In addition, the relative merits of an apartment building should be weighed against other prospective projects to maximize the impact on economic development.
- 3. Guaranteed placement on the tax rolls.** As described, the proposed 257 Thayer Street student residence project could be of interest to Brown in the future and we request a guarantee that the property will never be taken off the tax rolls. This could take the form of a "poison pill" contractual obligation from the developer or then-current owner to the city, such as a lump sum payment or annuity, which would take effect should the property ever be transferred to an entity exempt from property taxes.

**4. Hiring of a locally sensitive architect.** The most universal feedback specific to the 257 Thayer Street apartment building project as proposed has been the inadequacy of its design. The building should be one that will make the city and Thayer Street proud for years to come. We request that this or any project for the area be designed by an architect who has demonstrated design sensitivity to the local contexts.

**5. Review and approval of design by PHDC or other appropriate design review board.** We request that the design of any approved high-density project be subject to approval by PHDC or a City Council appointed board of local experts who can ensure the structure will fit with local architecture as well as exhibit excellence in design in its own right.

**6. Issuance of a completion bond.** Any project that involves demolition of multiple historic residences should be guaranteed with a completion bond so the city does not risk a change in economic factors leaving behind an incomplete project that would be a blight on the neighborhood.

**7. Proper abatement of hazardous materials and low-impact demolition.** Historic properties in various states of disrepair should be expected to have layers of lead paint and possibly asbestos and other hazards. These properties lie directly adjacent to Wheeler School and measures need to be taken to protect the school from health hazards and potential cleanup costs. Children are present on and in the areas surrounding the Wheeler property throughout the summer as well as during the school year.

**8. Preservation should not be dismissed.** The city has been recognized nationally for making preservation a priority and should not dismiss it completely in favor of economic factors, nor should it dismiss economic development for preservation at any cost. We ask that if the comprehensive plan is modified to support higher density development in these areas, that any potential projects for these properties should be weighed against each other in part by considering their ability to preserve and restore as many historic properties as possible. Currently the proposed 257 Thayer Street apartment does not offer any preservation benefits at all.

We thank you for your time and consideration of our role in this matter.

Sincerely,



Allison Spooner, President  
College Hill Neighborhood Association

cc: Robert Gilbane, Gilbane Development Company  
Robert Azar, Director of Current Planning

# 257 Thayer Street

## DESIGN OVERVIEW - June 2012

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ▶ **The updated design breaks the long repetitive mass into individual, “legible” parts according to the street they front on.**

- Frontage at Thayer Street responds to commercial scale and tradition of 2 to 4 story mercantile buildings.
- At major vehicular entry to block, create “hyphen” that breaks down long frontage on Euclid Street and acknowledges the break in the building pattern. Reduce the expressed building scale here to 2 stories.
- At eastern end of block which is purely residential, create a residential scale referencing local traditions.

- ▶ **Redesign floor plans at Brook Street frontage which creates the look and feel of two separate buildings and allows an opening in the building frontage with a visual connection to the courtyard.**

- ▶ **Reduce scale and monumentality of corner entrance at Thayer.**

- The scale at Thayer Street has been reduced by inverting the “turret” theme and expressing the corner as a glassy void.

- ▶ **The facades now vary scale of individual parts of the frontage between 3 and 4 stories within a legible rhythm.**

- 3 story volumes clearly expressed with terminating cornice. 4th story expressed as attic with setback and change in materials.
- Alternate these with 4 story gable fronted volumes which terminate in peaked roof and give interest to the skyline. Expressing full four floors ironically reduces the overall scale by providing contrast with lower 3 story bays.

- ▶ **The new material choices are logical and consistent throughout.**

- ▶ **The updated design for 257 Thayer improves the composition and proportion by:**

- Reducing number of architectural “phrases” being employed,
- Simplifying window patterns,
- Consolidating individual openings into larger groupings.



BROOK STREET ELEVATION



VIEW FROM THAYER STREET

### REDESIGN OVERVIEW

The façades have been redesigned to make the building more “legible” and understandable as a grouping of smaller buildings or parts of buildings and to ground it more firmly in the particular context of College Hill. The building has been bifurcated into a few clear parts, each with their own logic and identity. The Thayer Street frontage has been expressed as a single building with the simple logic and proportions of the traditional mercantile buildings found throughout Providence as well as Thayer Street. A strong retail-scaled base supports upper floors that display simple window patterns and a residential scale. Separating that “building” from the purely residential tail of the building extending to Brook Street is a “hyphen” which acknowledges the entrance to the parking and offers the opportunity to create a visual break in the long façade.

A reorganization of the facades along Euclid and Meeting Street and the introduction of pitched roofs and cornices create a more interesting rhythm of residentially scaled bays that, while literally 4 stories, to the pedestrian will feel more like 3 stories. With direct reference to local precedents found on Bowen and Thayer Streets as well as a more general invocation of the Collegiate Gothic style these facades now feel more firmly grounded in local and institutional traditions. Finally, by breaking the façade along Brook Street into two separate buildings framing a view into the courtyard we have attempted to respond to concerns for a more “open” and inviting expression of the building offering the public, visual, if not actual access to the interior of the block.



# COLLEGE HILL NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION & PROVIDENCE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## Thayer Street District Study Steering Committee

### 257 Thayer Street Requests (Not ranked in priority order)

- **No tax abatement, and a deed restriction indicating the property will stay on tax rolls:** The building will be privately owned and remain on the tax rolls. Gilbane must enter into an agreement that any future purchaser would remain obligated to keep the property on the tax rolls.
- **Save as many houses as possible:** As currently proposed the 257 Thayer Street project would entail the demolition of nine contributing structures in the College Hill National Register District built between c.1880 and 1920 in, forever changing the character of the neighborhood. The demolition of all nine buildings would not be acceptable. Preservation options may include the relocation of houses to nearby lots to acts as a buffer between institutional and residential areas. The current owners of the nine properties should be included in the process of finding relocation sites.
- **Design considerations:** Gilbane must refine the proposed building's design to develop more permeable facades, and further break up the monolithic design into four or five distinct sections. The design of the Euclid street façade should focus on breaking up the massiveness of the structure by increasing the size of the hyphen. The Steering Committee will continue to review future revisions to the building's design. Gilbane should also create a physical 3-D **design model** of the project in context, which includes blocks on the opposite side of Thayer, Euclid, Meeting, and Brook Streets.
- **Traffic study:** Gilbane must commission a complete traffic study as part of the planning process.
- **Issuance of a completion bond:** Gilbane must enter into a completion bond that adequately addresses the financial requirements for the project.
- **Low-impact construction:** Gilbane commit to construction practices that cause the lowest impact possible to the surrounding community. This will include providing shuttle transportation for construction workers to offsite parking areas to prevent increased traffic in the greater Thayer Street area during construction.
- **Public amenities:** Gilbane include public amenities in the development plan, such as benches, street trees, and both the elimination of curb cuts and replacement of sidewalks on both sides of Euclid Street.

- **Support of planning efforts:** Gilbane support community efforts to create a design review district for the greater Thayer Street area through representation during the planning process.
- **Improve management of commercial sector:** Gilbane must invest in the Thayer Street District Management Authority.

# COLLEGE HILL NEIGHBORHOOD ASSOCIATION & PROVIDENCE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

## Thayer Street District Study Steering Committee

### Planning Process Outline

Mission: The City of Providence, College Hill Neighborhood Association, Providence Preservation Society, Thayer Street District Management Authority, and other affected parties develop a thoughtful and deliberate planning mechanism that would preserve the character and increase the tax base of the greater Thayer Street area, setting guidelines for future proposals. These stakeholders would direct planning efforts by forming a request for proposals and selecting a planning consultant, offering continued guidance throughout the process. The development of a Thayer Street planning mechanism should include the following:

- The creation of a design review / design overlay district to preserve the historic fabric of the neighborhood while enhancing the economic viability of Thayer Street. The design review body would have the authority to review demolition applications.
- An analysis of both individual parcels and clusters of buildings from a land-use perspective to determine what the allowable density could be, and where development should occur.
- A “build-out analysis” detailing the effects of allowing higher density in the area.
- Traffic and parking analyses.
- Strengthening the Thayer Street District Management Authority.
- A review of the Institutional Zone to find agreeable tradeoffs with Brown University, such as the preservation of Pembroke Field. This process should include discussion of where Brown University wants to grow in the Jewelry District.