

Providence Preservation Society

Statement of Position: 257 Thayer Street/Gilbane Development Co. Proposal

FINDINGS AND OBSERVATIONS

The presentations made by Gilbane Development Company have been most thoughtful and informative and have reflected a strong desire and willingness to receive input and work with the community. Their proposal represents an innovative approach to providing private sector college housing, which, among many other features, calls for the property to remain on the tax rolls. PPS applauds Gilbane's 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.

The 2009 College Hill, Wayland & Fox Point Neighborhood Plan indicates that preservation of historic neighborhood fabric is a key initiative for the College Hill community, with a specific goal to "Prevent or minimize the demolition of historic properties."

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 19th century. The loss of these buildings would profoundly change this portion of the neighborhood.

Although it is unlikely these houses may ever return to single-family use, PPS believes the urban fabric should ideally reflect a community's history and contribute to a "sense of place." These nine buildings have not been adequately maintained, and any development on that site would benefit from demolition by neglect; as well as from the lack of protection that would have been provided had these properties been included in a local historic district.

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**. In an effort to bring this housing on line by August, 2014, the project timetable is very accelerated and the public approval process has already commenced.

Should buildings be demolished in order for this project to go forward, the design should reflect the urban significance of the site and be worthy of the specific location. Thus far, design changes seem to have consisted mostly of changes to surface elements.

PPS 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 adjusted to allow for additional planning and input.**
- 3. Neighborhood Development: PPS act as facilitator with all stakeholders involved in the future development of this three block area, including the College Hill Neighborhood Association and the Wheeler School.**
- 4. Design Excellence.: Gilbane engage the services of an architect with a demonstrated record of design excellence within the context of this type of historic and residential built environment.**