

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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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 19th 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



Wm McKenzie Woodward
Planning, Architectural Review & Marker Committee Co- Chair