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ARB denies bid to raze former Masonic lodge

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The ARP denied the city's request to demolish this building at 609 Sophia St., which served as the Prince Hall Masonic Lodge #61 starting in 1972. PETER CIHELKA /THE FREE LANCE-STAR

BY PAMELA GOULD / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Fredericksburg's Architectural Review Board Monday denied the city's request to demolish a 1920s-era building on Sophia Street that once served as a Masonic lodge for African-Americans.

The city was seeking to demolish it as part of plans to create a park overlooking the Rappahannock River.

The vote was 4–3, with members John Harris, Jamie Scully and Jon Van Zandt supporting the demolition.

Fifteen people spoke on the issue during a public hearing Monday night, more than have spoken on any other topic before the ARB, Chairwoman Kerri Barile noted. Nine urged the ARB to preserve the building.

The majority of those were from the African–American community, including former Councilman Hashmel Turner, who said he represented the Fredericksburg NAACP.

The two-story structure at 609 Sophia St. was built in 1921 by local builder E.G. “Peck” Heflin. It originally served as a residence and later as a site for child care.

In 1972, Prince Hall Masonic Lodge No. 61 purchased the building for use as a meeting place.

The fraternal organization with an African–American membership bought the building in March of that year and months later added brick to the exterior, presumably in response to Hurricane Agnes in June 1972.

One of those who spoke at Monday’s meeting, LeAndre Bennett of Spotsylvania County, said he is a member of the lodge and its historian. He said the group now meets in Spotsylvania.

Bennett said the lodge sold the building under pressure.

“We were also threatened that if we didn’t sell it, sooner or later they would take it from us,” he said.

But Senior Planner Erik Nelson’s memo to the ARB states that the city bought the building from the group in 2011 with the understanding it would be demolished to make way for Riverfront Park and that there were no objections to the plans.

The park is planned for 3.6 acres along Sophia Street between Shiloh (Old Site) Baptist Church and Wolfe Street.

Nelson said at an ARB meeting on Aug. 4 that if the group denied the city’s request for a certificate of appropriateness for the demolition that the decision would be appealed to the City Council.

The council will get its first look at the concept design during a work session Sept. 9.

Former Councilman George Solley, who chairs the Riverfront Park Task Force, noted that the design process has been transparent and that community residents have been invited all along the way to provide input.

He noted that the task force did not decide its opinion on the fate of the lodge until hiring a design firm and working with it to consider all options.

He said that preserving and repurposing the building was carefully evaluated but, ultimately, did not seem feasible.

The city hired Alexandria-based Rhodeside & Harwell in December to create a conceptual design for the park.

Van Zandt and other ARB members who voted against preserving the former lodge expressed support for telling the history of African-Americans in the city, but said the building wasn't an apt venue.

ARB member Kenneth McFarland became emotional as he argued for the lodge's preservation, saying if it was demolished, he'd be there with a camera to document it.

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<h2>Work session set for park design</h2>

The Fredericksburg City Council will hold a work session to discuss the Riverfront Park concept design on Sept. 9 at 5:30 p.m. in a second-floor conference room of City Hall, 715 Princess Anne St.

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