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PRESERVATION: Honoring the past is good for city's future

BY SEAN MARONEY AND SCOTT WALKER / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

The Historic Fredericksburg Foundation Inc. applauds and supports the Architectural Review Board's recent decision to deny the city's proposed demolition of the Masonic Hall building at 609 Sophia Street.

As is typical in situations like these, there is no easy or obvious solution to this debate. Why? Because, as is also typical, it is about much more than the fate of one building.

To start, we would like to make it clear that HFFI would like to see the lodge preserved and reused. We are a preservation advocacy group, after all. As a matter of principle, we view most demolition as destructive and wasteful, not to mention an extremely counterproductive way of addressing the city's sustainability goals.

The building's historic and architectural significance are not really the point of this discussion; though it possesses both. In addition to distinct associations with our community's African-American heritage, it also has ties to Peck Heflin, one of the most important builders in our city's early-20th-century development.

It has stood for nearly 100 years and maintains both its distinctive architectural character and physical integrity. No, at the heart of this issue is the concept of "preservation" and how we, as a community, value its importance.

We have already lost an astonishing amount of built history along the city's waterfront; history we can never get back. Now, ironically, the new Riverfront Park, which is ostensibly supposed to help us mend the disconnect that has existed between downtown and the river for nearly two centuries (a disconnect that led to much of that lost history), will involve the destruction of yet another piece of that past.

It has been argued that adaptive reuse is not possible in this case due to floodway restrictions. We agree that it will be a challenge, but not necessarily an insurmountable one; especially if we take demolition off the table and make the lodge's preservation a priority. We think you'll be amazed at how creative a motivated designer can be.

There are several examples nearby, in fact, that remind us of what's possible when you prioritize preservation. The Silversmith House, located a couple of blocks to the north, is one. The Gravatt house, located across the street from the lodge, is another. Both were saved from what, at the time, was deemed to be their necessary demolition, and later adapted for new and productive uses.

A MATTER OF TIMING

Most importantly, though, is the issue of timing. Why does the fate of this building have to be decided immediately for the sake of a project that, as far as we know, has no funding in place? Is this building the ultimate impediment to the park's completion? Can't we take some additional time to discuss possible alternatives?

We like to emphasize that "preservation" is good business; that what has been saved and what we decide to save in the present and future plays a key role in defining the unique sense of place and quality of life that make Fredericksburg so appealing; appealing to tourists and visitors, to new companies and corporate investments, and to new residents. Even if you don't live downtown, the Historic District—and its preservation—are important to our future. No change, including demolition, is without effect.

The final resolution of this issue is not up to the Historic Fredericksburg Foundation, though many people seem to think that it is!

Preservation issues, now, after 57 years of HFFI, are not just up to us, but to all of you and to the various branches, employees and officials of our city government.

What we decide to preserve says a great deal about the kind of community we want to be.

Sean Maroney is executive director and Scott Walker is treasurer of the HFFI board of directors. They have written this on behalf of all the directors.

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