

REPORT OF THE SPECIAL ARCHITECTURAL COMMITTEE MEETING
PHILADELPHIA HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Arlene Matzkin, Chair
Room 401 City Hall, City Council Caucus Room
17 September 1996

Present

Arlene Matzkin, Chairperson
Tony Atkin
Penelope Batcheler
J. William Cornell
David Hollenberg
Herbert Levy

Richard Tyler, Historic Preservation Officer
Laura Spina, Historic Preservation Specialist

Also

Wayne S. Spilove, Chair, Historical Commission
David Brownlee, Historical Commission member
Duane Bumb, Deputy Director, Department of Commerce, Historical
Commission member
Barbara Kaplan, Executive Director, City Planning Commission,
Historical Commission member
Steve Mullin, Director, Department of Commerce, Historical
Commission member
Robert Vance, Chair, City Planning Commission, Historical
Commission member
Scott Wilds, Office of Housing and Community Development,
Historical Commission member
Robert Barnett
Alex Soroka, Chair, 30th Ward
Tom Ferrick, Philadelphia Inquirer
Dan Deibler, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission
Michael Greenberg, Toll Brothers
Andrew Terhune, Toll Brothers
Florence Levy
Lenore Millhollen, Center City Residents Association (CCRA)
John McCalla, Weekly Press
Tom Clark, 2606 Catharine Street
Kate Turcich, 2613 Catharine Street
Terry Gillen, 2213 Naudain Street
Michael Schade, CCRA
Bill Bolger, National Park Service
Richard Snowden, Preservation Alliance
Martin Jay Rosenblum, CCRA
Milton Marks, Preservation Alliance

Ms. Matzkin called the meeting to order at 7:10 p.m.

Mr. Tyler started the meeting by giving some historical background of the site. The federal government built the United States Naval Home to house retired sailors, seamen and marines and at one time it served as the Naval Academy. William Strickland designed the main building, Biddle Hall, in 1827. Strickland also designed two dependencies, the Governor's House and Surgeon's Quarters, in 1844. John McArthur, the architect of City Hall, designed a fourth building, Laning Hall, which was demolished several years ago.

Mr. Tyler described the purpose of the meeting. To begin the development process, Toll Brothers, the owner and developer of the site, must secure a change in the zoning ordinance for the property. The Planning Commission asked for comments from the Historical Commission in anticipation of its consideration of a zoning amendment for submission to City Council. The Committee meeting and any Commission comment on it will also serve to provide guidance to Toll Brothers and their consultants in the further development and refinement of the plan. The discussion will address the site plan only. This meeting is of the Architectural Committee, an advisory committee to the Historical Commission. The Historical Commission will hear the proposal and the Committee's report at its 9 October meeting, but will take no action that will result in the issue of permits, for no permit application is before the Commission.

Andrew Terhune of Toll Brothers presented the site plan for the development. Mr. Terhune described the development as a mixture of low-, mid- and high-rise buildings in an economically viable, urban environment. Toll Brothers wishes to provide a secure, gated community with convenient access to the amenities in the area at moderate prices. The development of the 1200 units is expected to take ten years to realize and will create construction and secondary jobs.

The development of the site is limited in several ways. First, the shape of the site, a trapezoid with sharp angles, is not conducive to the typical urban grid system. Second, the existing street layout around the site is limiting. Third, facilities around the site, such as the Vocational-Technical School and the PECO facility, are not conducive to residential properties. Fourth, units must be built around Biddle Hall and the parade ground. Fifth, there is a major grade change along Bainbridge Street.

Using two architectural renderings, Mr. Terhune walked through the site describing the development. The first phase will be three mid-rise buildings at the corner of Bainbridge and South 24th Streets. The development should begin there so that the new residents have easy access to the area and existing services. The parade ground, wrought-iron fence and gates and Biddle Hall will remain intact. Two curved buildings with three- or four-story townhouses will spring from Biddle Hall and frame the parade ground. Along Bainbridge Street, the development will have townhouses which reflect the existing housing across the

street. The rest of the site will have a mixture of mid- and high-rise buildings. Mr. Terhune stated that the view of Biddle Hall that is seen today will remain. Existing entrances from Gray's Ferry Avenue will remain and additional entrances will be introduced. Parking will be underground with at least one space for each unit. The planning and design development process will take about two years and then the condition of the real estate market will determine the start of construction.

Ms. Matzkin questioned the idea of a gated community with mid-rise buildings placed for access at the street. Mr. Terhune stated that the gates are to provide a sense of security for the new residents while not separating a development entirely from the street.

Ms. Matzkin also questioned the removal of the Governor's House and the Surgeon's Quarters which have historical value. Mr. Terhune noted that the plan anticipates the removal of those two structures. The road from the corner mid-rise buildings to the rear of the site cuts through the area of the Governor's House. Mr. Terhune stated that the Governor's House is not in a convenient place and it would be too difficult to have the road go around it. The architects and developer explored other designs, but determined that a feasible design includes demolition of the two dependencies. Committee members asked to see some of the other designs and reasons for their rejection. Mr. Terhune did not have any studies or sketches of the previous designs. Ms. Kaplan asked if the architects were told that the two dependencies must be kept in the design or if they were expendable.

Mr. Levy stated that the Governor's House was the most important building of the complex at one time. The view of the site from Gray's Ferry Avenue, with this plan, is limited to a brief view of Biddle Hall surrounded by new wings. The entire complex of three buildings is visible from the street and should be kept. Mr. Terhune noted that the retaining wall at the corner limits the view of Biddle Hall from the corner, so the mid-rise building will not obscure an existing view.

The Committee asked the developer about the fate of Biddle Hall. Mr. Terhune stated that the exterior of the building will certainly be cleaned and maintained. The development would not be successful if it is not in good condition. However, a new use for the building has not been decided.

Mr. Atkin stated that the high-rise building directly behind Biddle Hall will negatively effect the view of Biddle Hall and perhaps could be moved to the side. He asked for viewsheds and sight lines to see how Biddle Hall will be affected by the high development around it. The Committee recognized the need for the high density and wants the site to be developed, but the effect of the development on the three major buildings has not been presented.

Robert Vance noted that the use of the Governor's House as a unit of housing would provide the developer a unique feature and utilize the historic building. Mr. Greenberg, also from Toll Brothers, stated that economic feasibility is important and the proposed plan is economically viable. Mr. Greenberg, in answering a question, noted that the option of moving the two dependencies was not explored.

Mr. Hollenberg stated that the Committee wants the development to be successful and the developer says that the demolition of the two dependencies is an important step towards that success, but if the first phase is not successful and no more units are built, the two historically significant buildings will be lost with nothing in their place. A more detailed explanation of the first phase will be welcomed. Mr. Greenberg stated that the nature of the real estate market will dictate the rhythm and staging of the development. Mr. Hollenberg noted and the Committee agreed that Biddle Hall and its two dependencies are a single unit and should be treated as such. Also, the entire property is historic, not just the three buildings.

There was brief discussion on the historic nature of the walls. Mr. Tyler stated that the wrought-iron and stone fence along Gray's Ferry Avenue is an important historic feature, but the historic brick retaining wall may not be as significant. Most of the retaining wall needs to be rebuilt.

The floor was opened to the public.

Tom Clark, a neighbor, testified that all three buildings are visible from the street and create a unified landscape.

Kate Turcich, a neighbor, made several points. First, the condition of the property is poor. Second, the retaining wall is in total disrepair and unsafe. Third, the two dependencies are equal to Biddle Hall in importance. The development should be built around the three buildings.

Alex Soroka, Chair of the 30th Ward, thanked the Architectural Committee for having a strong stand to save the two buildings. The community strongly wants these buildings saved.

Dan Deibler of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, which is also the State Historic Preservation Office, testified that his presence was two-fold. First, he attended to learn about the proposal for the site. Second, he came to explain the role of the state in the process. Toll Brothers acquired the property from the General Services Administration with covenants. The state, along with GSA, has the power to enforce those covenants. Also, the state must approve any changes or alterations to the property. The property was entered on the National Register in 1972 as a "property worthy of preservation." It became a National Historic Landmark in 1976 by the Secretary of the Interior as a property that has important national significance as a part of the nation's history.

Richard Snowden, Chair of the Preservation Alliance, testified that the organization is very interested in the development of the property. Preservation Alliance is proud to report that it may be the recipient of a major grant to study and evaluate the property and make recommendations for Toll Brothers to consider. The details of the grant and a timetable should be in place within a week. Mr. Snowden offered the services and expertise of the Alliance to the developer.

Ms. Batcheler stated that she was very pleased to hear the opportunity for a report and asked that it include a current conditions assessment. Mr. Snowden stated that it will and the report will be available to the Historical Commission and the public.

Paul Steinke, Board member of Preservation Alliance and a neighbor, explained that the developer and the city are faced with an historic opportunity. Toll Brothers is a successful builder in the area and the property is a unique parcel of historic land. If the project is well designed and executed it will provide the city with a unique residential area. The developer, however, must respect and understand the important nature of the entire National Historic Landmark property. Mr. Steinke asked for permission for the Alliance to enter the property to perform a conditions assessment report. Mr. Terhune stated that he could not give permission at that time.

Bill Bolger, with the National Landmarks Program of the National Park Service, testified that access to the site has not been permitted to the National Park Service. The condition of the site is critical and the report offered by the Preservation Alliance is needed. Also, the open space is an important resource of the property which has not been discussed. The density proposed now is double the density that was approved previously. The Committee and Commission have compromised with the developer already by allowing the demolition of Laning Hall.

Mr. Bolger stated that the property was sold by GSA at a price below market rate, about \$1.2 million, to accommodate the preservation of the historic site. Mr. Bolger noted that condition of the site is very important. Mr. Tyler stated that the property has been inspected by the Department of Licenses and Inspections and the buildings have not been declared imminently dangerous. Mr. Hollenberg noted that the developer has not used the poor condition of the buildings as a justification for demolition and the absence of that argument will be noted in the Committee's and Commission's deliberations. Mr. Bolger asked Mr. Terhune if a maintenance plan is in place. Mr. Terhune stated that there is no plan, but some repairs had been made on occasion. Also, Toll Brothers did not gain power over the property until 1988 and some deterioration had occurred before this time. Mr. Tyler stated that the conditions of the buildings do not eliminate the possibility of rehabilitation. Buildings in far worse condition have been utilized. Mr. Terhune stated that vandalism has played a role in the condition of the buildings as

well.

Discussion ensued on the priorities of the Historical Commission. Every aspect of the plan will receive consideration but the first priority will be the three historic buildings as a group. Development of the site is important to the Committee, but it must respect and enhance the historic nature of the entire property. The Committee also concluded that the three historic buildings must be treated as a unit; the Governor's House and Surgeon's Quarters are equal to Biddle Hall in importance. Besides an over-all site plan, the Committee wants to see a Phase One plan to understand the beginnings of the development.

Terry Gillen, a neighbor, urged the Planning Commission to evaluate the density of the corner at Bainbridge and South 24th Streets.

Mr. Tyler stated that the next meeting will be the Historical Commission meeting on October 9th when it will hear the report of the Architectural Committee. The site plan proposal will then be evaluated by the Planning Commission for the change in zoning only.

The meeting was adjourned at 9:10 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Laura M. Spina

Laura M. Spina
Historic Preservation Specialist