

Allen, Amber

From: Robin Sanders [REDACTED]
Sent: Tuesday, January 10, 2023 1:58 PM
To: HPD Preservation
Cc: Watson, Kirk; Qadri, Zo; Alexander, Jason; Gonzales, Rodney; Cronk, Spencer; Wendy Price Todd
Subject: Objection to Project HR 2022-172625 (409 Monroe)

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PLEASE INCLUDE IN BACK-UP DOCUMENTATION FOR 1-11-23 MEETING OF HISTORIC LANDMARK COMMISSION
REGARDING HR 2022-172625

Historical Landmark Commission
City of Austin

Robin Sanders
1508 Newning Ave. (Lewis-Thomas House)

Dear Commissioners,

I write to express my objection to the proposed demotion of the existing home at 409 Monroe. I own a historically designated home (built in 1891) at 1508 Newning Ave., less than 500 feet from the proposed project. I have been at this location for 32 years and I have often admired the architecture and stateliness of 409 Monroe (the third house to the south of my home).

The home at 409 Monroe is in a prominent location, at the intersection of Newning and Monroe, serving as a highly-traveled gateway to Travis Heights-Fairview Park from Congress Avenue. All four of the homes at the intersection are historical in nature and two of them have City landmark seals. Of the four homes at the intersection, 409 is the most geographically elevated. The architecture is elegant and unique to the neighborhood; the home contributes to the Travis Heights-Fairview Park National Register Historical District.

Respectfully, staff's recommendation that the Commission approve the demolition is inexplicable. Working with staff over the decades I have owned a historic home, I have found them to be committed to preservation (as their name suggests), but this is a departure from historical norms. By way of example:

* Staff acknowledges that the scale and height of the proposed new construction is *inappropriate* to surrounding houses and that its proportion, design and style do *not* reflect those of the surrounding district. Further, the outer walls and fenestrations are only "somewhat compatible" with the surrounding neighborhood and, in summary, the project "meets [only] some" of the applicable Historic Design standards.

* Staff acknowledges that the existing two-story home, built in 1910, maintains a high degree of integrity, featuring Four-Square stylistic influences, deep eaves and substantial pillars supporting a first-floor full-wide porch. Its scale, height, proportion, design and style are consistent with the three other one- and two-story rectangular-style homes at the intersection. It is more than 50 years old, features architecture unique to the district, and contributes to the Travis Heights-Fairview Park National Register Historic District.

* Despite the acknowledged shortcomings of the proposed project and the integrity and architectural significance of the existing structure, staff recommends approving demolition, purportedly because the home lacks both “historical association” or “community value.” (It was not evaluated for archaeological significance). These are very subjective factors and I disagree with staff’s conclusion on both. (The home need only meet one of these two factors to achieve historic landmark designation).

The staff's report says the property was originally built by a carpenter who worked primarily for University of Texas and that the home served as a hub for South Austin social activities in the early 20th century. I fail to understand how a hub of community social activities, built by a person who worked for decades building with his own hands and skill much of the City’s flagship university, is not “historically associated.”

For all the reasons set forth in this letter—including but not limited to its prominent location, its unique and stately architectural features and its high degree of integrity after 113 years—the home is of “community value.” It is inarguably of value to the Travis Heights-Fairview Park community, as evidenced both by the objections from surrounding property owners and the unanimous vote of the South River City Community Association’s Executive Committee opposing this demotion (see 12-12-22 letter from SRCC President Wendy Price Todd, backup 13c) .

The sellers of the property at 409 Monroe are my next-door neighbors, Gerald (“Mac”) and Maureen McReynolds. They own a historically designated main house and two rental units on the northwest corner of Newning and Monroe, between my house and the subject property. We have been neighbors for over 30 years and I have visited their home on multiple occasions. Last week I had the opportunity to visit with Maureen McReynolds and discussed 409 Monroe with her. She said the buyer—the applicant in this context—assured her and her husband that he would maintain the street-view/facade of 409 and build a new structure while preserving the home’s unique historic features. She further said, wryly, that he had apparently “changed his mind;” he actually attempted demotion without notification to the sellers or anyone else in the neighborhood until neighbors intervened. She said she would like to see him honor the commitment he made to herself and her husband. The only time I see her outside the home is sitting in her wheelchair on her front porch, facing 409 Monroe.

Both Mrs. McReynolds and I are retired City of Austin employees, she from many years with the Austin Water Utility and me from 17 years with the City’s Law Department. We both appreciate the dedication and expertise required of City of Austin employees, including but not limited to staff of HLD. That said and in regard to 409 Monroe, HLD staff got it wrong. The demotion permit should be denied and the buyer should be required to work with the neighborhood association to develop a plan to honor 409 Monroe's unique and elegant exterior while constructing a living space that is consistent with surrounding homes in scale, height, proportion, design and style.

According to the Historical Landmark Commission website, it is the first duty of the Historic Landmark Commission to *promote* historic preservation in the City of Austin (emphasis supplied). In that role, the Commission serves as a unique firewall against unbridled greed and irrevocable destruction of the properties contributing to the quality and character of the Travis Heights-Fairview Park neighborhood and historic district. The home at 409 Monroe is of historical, architectural and community value, as set forth herein, and I, on behalf of myself and my neighbors, humbly and fervently request that it be preserved.

Robin Sanders


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