

March 22, 2023

Pawtucket Historic District Commission
137 Roosevelt Avenue,
Pawtucket, RI 02860

Attn: Camerin Bennett, Assistance Director of Planning & Redevelopment
(cbennett@pawtucketri.com)

Dear Pawtucket Historic District Commissioners:

Preserve RI, the statewide nonprofit advocate for historic places, writes to encourage the Commission to conduct a thorough assessment of the application to demolish the Read-Ott House in the Quality Hill Historic District. Pawtucket's historic district ordinance and the Standards and Guidelines of the Pawtucket Historic District Commission recognize that demolition of structures, particularly architecturally significant buildings, "constitutes an irreplaceable loss" to the historic district and the City of Pawtucket. Demolition is "strongly discouraged".

According to the Standards and Guidelines, any applicant seeking to demolish a structure "must make a good faith effort to demonstrate that **all alternatives to demolition have been evaluated** (emphasis in the original). Alternatives include rehabilitation, sale, adaptive reuse and relocation of the structure. Further, Pawtucket's ordinance in Section 410-37(D) requires the Commission to determine that the owner seeking to demolish a building has made "continuing *bona fide* and reasonable efforts to sell the structure" to a purchaser who is capable of a preservation outcome.

In addition, all applications for demolition require information about how the site will be treated once the building is removed. Plans for the development of the site should be included in the application. The Standards and Guidelines "strongly discourage" the use of the site for surface parking as such intrusions into the setting of the historic area create uncharacteristic gaps that can seriously harm the integrity of the historic district.

Acknowledging that the decisions to allow demolition are irreversible, the documentation requirements for demolition proposals are extensive. The Standards and Guidelines make the process to seek approval for demolition clear: the Commission must first make a formal determination of the architectural and historical significance of the structure. The Read-Ott house is listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a contributing building to the Quality Hill Historic District. The building has architectural merit, as one of the "mansion-caliber" buildings on Walcott Street. The building also plays an important role in the integrity of the historic district, due to its prominent setting located along Walcott Street, the spine of the historic area.

Once the Commission determines the property to be of architectural and historical significance, then the Commission must determine whether sufficient information has been submitted to allow a thorough review of the application for demolition, including whether all alternatives to demolition have been considered. Only when the information is complete can the Commission proceed to decision making.

In coming to its conclusion to approve or deny a petition for demolition, the Standards and Guidelines spell out review criteria that the Commission must use. In order to approve demolition at least one of the following requirements must be met: the property presents a safety hazard that cannot be remedied (even by a new purchaser); the preservation of the structure is a deterrent to a major improvement program of substantial benefit to the community; the preservation of the structure would cause an undue and unreasonable financial hardship to the owner or any purchaser; preservation would not be in the interests of the majority of the community.

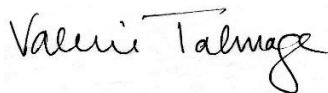
The alternative of selling the property to transfer the building into the hands of new owners who are interested and capable of taking care of it needs to be fully addressed. That the current owners would prefer to rid the site of the historic building and clear the site for parking are not reasons to concur with an application for demolition.

If the Read-Ott House is demolished, the decision is final, and the property will be lost forever. The impact will be both the loss of the structure and the diminishment of the surrounding district. The owner's years of disinvestment is creating a situation of "demolition by neglect". The Commission cannot further enable the owner's disinvestment by permitting outright demolition unless the owners have demonstrated a good faith effort to consider all alternatives, including their sale of the property.

Preserve Rhode Island offers assistance to support independent studies of the conditions of the property and evaluate the feasibility of reuse alternatives. We can connect evaluators to appropriate historic building experts and may be able to help with financial support for such studies. We can connect the owners with potential purchasers. It has been proven time and time again that the rehabilitation and reuse of historic buildings is an economic and cultural benefit for local communities – Preserve RI can provide numerous examples to help make the case for preserving the Read-Ott House. If a desire for additional parking is the underlying reason for the long-term neglect of and the current proposal to demolish the historic house, a better solution would be for the owners and city planners to address the parking issue directly and discover alternatives that are mutually beneficial to the owners and the neighborhood.

Please let us know if a comprehensive and fair process to evaluate the future of the Read-Ott House will be devised –we'll be delighted to participate, identify resources, and otherwise support such a good faith effort.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Valerie Talmage". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke extending from the top of the "V".

Valerie Talmage
Executive Director