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Voelz Chandler: City, developers revisit landmark issues

'De-designation' in LoDo, saving Wash Park school coming up for resolution

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Mary Voelz
Chandler

The Denver Landmark Preservation Commission may conclude two high-profile issues during public hearings on Tuesday.

The first is the fast-track push by city officials to get the commission to "de-designate" a portion of the Lower Downtown Historic District, at 14th and Larimer streets, just off Speer Boulevard.

Designated in 1988, the historic district not only saved an assemblage of commercial structures, but was the catalyst for boosting land values. The land in question now holds parking lots, but was the site of Denver's first City Hall. A bell from that building is on the

site, thus the name Bell Park.

During a July 19 presentation to the commission, Richard Geller of Paradise Land Co. and Parking Pros, and architect David Owen Tryba showed a model of a building up to 370 feet high, and thus too tall for the height limitations of lower downtown (55 feet at that spot).

City planning staff urged a speedy Aug. 16 public hearing on the de-designation - this for a body where agendas grow and people wait for weeks to snag a spot. Commission members, saying they felt pressured, declined to set the hearing.

On Sept. 6 Tryba and Geller (and the latter's partner, David Paderski) returned for what was described as an informational meeting. The building had grown from a footprint of around 5,000 square feet to about 10,000 square feet, but still hovered at a similar height.

Perhaps some of the rush has to do with the purchase and sale agreements signed in April between the city and Paradise Land Co./Parking Pros. The latter is the prospective seller of land at 550 W. Colfax Ave. and 1440 Fox St., which is to become part of the Justice Center project; the sale price is about \$2.7 million, but would be \$3.2 million if the city does not go through with the other agreement for the land in lower downtown.

The deadline to acquire those parcels: Nov. 1, with a Nov. 15 closing proposed for both transactions. The agreement involving the lower downtown properties includes a provision that the mayor's office agrees to help the developers with their rezoning applications, "inform city departments that the mayor's office fully supports the rezoning request and appear before City Council to request approval" of that process, which must be done by Nov. 1.

City planners have told the commission not to think of the building while deciding. There's a challenge: ignore it after all the time spent describing this building, which would be surrounded by park land the developer says it will give to the city.

If the commission approves the de-designation, it goes to the Denver City Council, through its committee system and a public hearing. If the vote is no, it should die.

MEANWHILE: Another issue may conclude with a compromise that could save one building of the former Denver International School/Washington Park School.

The proposal to landmark the entire complex came to the commission on June 7 from a neighborhood group, but the new owner was opposed. That's opposed as in he wanted to scrape *all* of the complex (a 1906 building, additions from 1922 and 1928, and a 1980s gym) and build 18 homes. (The DIS couldn't afford that site, and had just sold it.) The public hearing on designation has been continued since July.

In the meantime, the neighbors and owner Jonathan Miller, of Colorado Land and Home Co., have spent their time wisely. City Councilman Charlie Brown asked for a mediator to guide them through discussions to find a solution. Apparently neighbors were able to convince Miller that preservation can pay, in recycling a good building rather than wasting it, and paying respect to a neighborhood's character.

Both sides announced on Sept. 6 that when the issue goes back to the commission, it will be as an amended application to designate only the 1928 building. Miller will be able to raze the rest and build single family homes on the west side (with attached homes to the south). On the east side, the 1928 building designed by Harry Manning, a feast of terra cotta decorative elements, would be turned into loft-style housing.

It is a compromise that does have a down side: the 1906 and 1922 buildings are attractive, though linked in a way the owner says would be difficult to reuse. And there apparently is no time and no money proffered to conduct a historic structure assessment on those buildings.

Still, the Manning building would survive. More neighborhood meetings are planned on the issue (information: 303-777-4447) to calm tempers, explain the project, and prepare for a town hall meeting Oct. 11.

So who gets the job of monitoring the design of all those houses?

Chandlerm@RockyMountainNews.com or 303-892-2677.

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