

Members of the County Council

Thank you for accepting my written testimony about the historic designation of the former Wellers' dry cleaner site. To cut to the chase, I am writing to express my strong opposition to historic designation.

I live about a half a mile from the location, and walk by it all the time. Until recently it was an abandoned, rotting shell, with broken windows and sporadic plywood, and served no function other than to sate the aesthetic appetites of people that think neighborhoods exist more to look at than for people to live, work, and thrive in.

Now it is being used actively as a beauty supply shop. One would think that people would support this change, but no. In message boards, facebook groups, and elsewhere, people have derided the store as "trashy" and other such pejoratives, which is notable considering that the clientele for the business is decidedly less old and white than most people calling for preservation. People have called it "just a beige box" because it has been painted in a way they don't like, while waxing poetic about how the building used to mean something, used to have a soul, and other such pleasantries.

Sounding so high minded and above the fray, caring about things beyond dollars and cents may sound pure and selfless, but in this case it's actually quite selfish. I get why people fear change and relish the past, truly I do. I actually don't like change much myself, find comfort in routines, and know how scary it is when people and places around you drift in and out of your life. Still, that doesn't mean we get to try to stop all change because we like things the way they used to be. We don't get to hold a death grip on the past and squeeze the life out of a space because we wish we could stop time.

Neighborhoods are living, breathing, vibrant things. They ebb and flow and grow and change, and sometimes that means that they start to fill fewer of our needs even as they start to better meet the needs of others. Who are we to stand in the way of that? Who is anyone here to say that their memories of a building are more important than the business there now, or the other uses that might happen with the land if we allow it to adapt the way something so close to public transit, and in the middle of a vibrant downtown might if not put in a nostalgic straightjacket?

I think our historical designation process, and the planning board's role in it, need to be retooled*, as even in a case as dubious as this for preservation the board faced significant constraints in making its appropriate recommendation, but the council has the scope and remit to do what it feels is best in this original case as well and I think it makes a mockery of the very idea of community to prioritize something like this in the middle of a vibrant, dynamic downtown, and so close to the transit that the county officially, and appropriately, centers significant development around.

If the current use of this building continues for years? Great! If another business replaces it? Great! If it gets torn down and turned into a mixed-used site with housing and retail? Great! If

some of the structure/sign remains and is incorporated into a new building? Great! If it doesn't? Also great! All of these are fine. What isn't fine is demanding something stay the same because we like looking at it. And let's face it. That's what we're ultimately talking about here.

Sure some will say this is about history. And yes, it is, but at the end of the day, the operative question is are buildings meant to be looked at, or lived and worked in? I know my answer. I'm not saying that historic preservation is always wrong if a building has true historic significance (I have zero objection to the other preservation project that was on the same docket for example),but being the holdover of an architectural style, not the site of a historic event, and not a site of cultural importance, doesn't rise to the threshold for preservation, at least not lightly. And I believe that threshold should be a high one.

People asking this building to be "protected" will ask you to think about the damage done if history is lost. Fair enough. Allow me to ask you to think about some other things.

Think about what happens if the nostalgia of a generation that has greater wealth, including housing wealth, than younger ones is allowed to override the importance of jobs and commerce and potentially future homes for those unable to buy one when they were cheap decades ago. Think about what happens if we demand this building be frozen in amber, if we don't give the land the flexibility it needs to meet the needs of the community, whatever it may be now and later. If we do that, we do a disservice to the community

Think about the fact that there are cultures other than the one people are trying to preserve here. Think about the fact that preserving this space necessarily means choosing the culture of the past over the current community, and what that says about equity.

Think about the fact that neither I, nor you, nor anyone else can say what the best use of this space will be 50 years from now, or even 10 years from now, and that to presume that we know best, forever and hereafter, by protecting a building in the form that it ultimately found itself abandoned in is, in short, hubris.

Think about the possibility that preserving this space has a better chance of making people feel better than it has of actual doing good. The space as it is now can live on in peoples' memory, but people can't live and work in memories. Change happens, it's part of life, and it's usually scary. That doesn't mean we get to stop it so that we get to look at something we like looking at.

Communities aren't like blocks of granite. They change, the people living in them change. If we pretend they don't, we are fooling ourselves. This doesn't mean all history is bad and all change is good, but it does mean that we should have a good reason to stop it from happening, and I just don't think this is one of them.

Don't give into the sentimentality for a dry cleaning business that is dead and gone no matter what we do here, unless you want to "honor" its legacy by harming the community it was such a part of.

Thank you

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* This recent piece has some ideas about reform that I think could be very helpful.

<https://ggwash.org/view/89179/goojie-gootie-google-goojie>