

Dupont Current 4 July 2012

ANC criticizes board on Third Church vote

By BRADY HOLT
Current Staff Writer

After the D.C. Historic Preservation Review Board rejected a planned office building on the site of the Third Church of Christ, Scientist, church member Darrow Kirkpatrick was almost nonchalant.

The church is used to setbacks in its long-running effort to demolish its much-lambasted Brutalist building at 900 16th St., he said, and the board's May 24 ruling that the proposal for the site was too tall is just one more.

"We're preparing to move forward," Kirkpatrick told the Dupont Circle advisory neighborhood commission at its June 13 meeting. Referring to the Biblical leader's wanderings in the desert, he said, "We're taking our cue from Moses — 40 years. We've got 21



Bill Petros/The Current

Preservationists began pushing in 1991 for the city to designate the Brutalist church at 16th and I streets as a historic landmark.

years behind us."

But neighborhood commissioners weren't ready to let the issue go that easily. Several sharply criticized the preservation board and the Historic Preservation Office, and the commission voted unanimously to write a letter

See Church/Page 27

CHURCH: Preservation board rejects plan for Christian Scientist site

From Page 1

questioning how thoroughly and impartially the officials reviewed the issue.

In what commission chair Will Stephens referred to as "insult night at the ANC," several commissioners took turns blasting city preservation officials involved in the decision. Particular ire was reserved for state historic preservation officer David Maloney, who co-authored the preservation office's report on the project proposal.

Developer ICG Properties has pitched a building that would stand 108 feet tall, with a 15-foot mechanical penthouse on top that would not be counted in zoning matters; the uppermost ninth floor would be set back to be less visible from the street. But the board rejected the plan by a 5-2 vote, ordering ICG to stay under an established precedent of a 90-foot height limit along the length of 16th Street.

"Sixteenth Street is unique, with predominantly institutional buildings with a distinctive look," board member Graham Davidson said at last month's hearing. "I don't hear a compelling reason why a building should go above 90 feet on this very special street."

But neighborhood commissioners said this logic defies the precedent of the Hay-Adams Hotel at 16th and H streets, which was recently allowed to expand upward and stands taller than the proposal for the Third Church site. The hotel wasn't shown among the several dozen pictures of existing 16th Street buildings in Maloney's report.

"That omission calls into question the competence and the integrity of their staff," said neighborhood commissioner Mike Silverstein.

Stephens also called it "egregious" that the report didn't mention the neighborhood commission's vote of support for the project.

In an email to The Current, Maloney stood by his recommendation that the preservation board allow a building no more than 90 feet tall —

"I don't hear a compelling reason why a building should go above 90 feet on this very special street."

— Preservation board member Graham Davidson

which, he noted, would already mean double the density on the site today. "The bottom-line recommendation adopted by the Board was not to exceed this 100% increase by any more, in order to maintain the existing height limit and protect the important historic vista of the main approach to the White House," he wrote.

Maloney added that although it wasn't included in the written report, the Hay-Adams was discussed orally at last month's hearing, and he noted that the neighborhood commission's testimony was also heard and properly considered during that time.

The Third Church of Christ, Scientist, building was constructed in 1971, and congregants quickly deemed it unwelcoming and difficult to maintain. But preservationists considered it a

classic example of Brutalist architecture, and in 1991 began an effort to landmark the property.

After a series of lawsuits pitting preservation interests against religious freedom, the Mayor's Agent for Historic Preservation in 2009 granted the church the right to demolish the building upon approval of a new design for the site. But because the site lies within the 16th Street Historic District, city preservation officials who had previously advocated retaining the church building must also sign off on the replacement project.

"[Maloney] was for landmarking and he fought very hard," said neighborhood commissioner Bob Meehan. Alleging bias, he said that "it doesn't seem to me that this staff report is acting in good faith."

In his email, Maloney replied that the Historic Preservation Office is treating the issues separately. "The Mayor's Agent has already issued a very fair decision allowing demolition of the church on economic hardship grounds," he wrote. "HPO respects that decision as a settled matter and has no intention of reopening that issue in any way."

What remains undecided at this point is what the church and ICG will do next — whether they will seek to redesign the project or appeal once again to the Mayor's Agent. "We are still working with Third Church to evaluate all options and determine the best course forward," ICG spokesperson David Stern wrote in an email.

Any building taller than 90 feet would need special zoning approval, which is a separate process from the historic preservation review.