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Riverside Garage Now Faces Another Roadblock

by Raanan Geberer (edit@brooklyneagle.net), published online 07-18-2009

State Agency Rejects Plan; Open Space, Trees Are Issues

By Raanan Geberer
Brooklyn Daily Eagle

BROOKLYN HEIGHTS — The ongoing saga of the planned underground garage at the historic Riverside Apartments complex at Columbia Place and Joralemon Street just took another turn.

Even though the garage, which would be covered by landscaping, was approved last year by the Landmarks Preservation Commission, it was rejected this past Thursday by the state Division of Housing and Community Renewal (DHCR).

The order from DHCR, obtained by the Eagle and signed by Rent Administrator Lilia Albano, reviews the history of the complex's open space. During the construction of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway in the 1940s, it reads, 40 percent of the housing complex was demolished to make way for the highway. Then, in 1991 "the prior owner constructed a parking lot that contained 31 spaces and encompassed a portion of the courtyard."

Picture; Copy not for sale



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At that time, DHCR ordered a rent reduction, "and the [current] owner seeks to remove the rent reduction by virtue of this application [because it would allegedly restore some green space]."

DHCR acknowledges that the owner, The Pinnacle Group, has indicated that the garage will not result in any pollution and that "tenants will benefit from the new park-like atmosphere." However, the document continues, "The application as amended would restore some courtyard area, but that is counterbalanced by negative factors.

"The proposed construction would require the removal of the mature trees, which currently populate the site. New plantings would not provide the same cover as the existing years [and] for many years into the future."

Pinnacle's attorney, Kenneth K. Fisher of the firm WolfBlock, said, "Obviously, we are disappointed at this initial determination. However, there are other levels of review at DHCR which we will be pursuing shortly, and we are confident that ultimately our Landmarks Commission-approved plan will be [upheld] and will meet the needs of the tenants and others."

Decision Gets Applause

On the other hand, some people active in community affairs were very happy at the decision.

Joseph Merz, an architect in Willowtown, pointed out that although Pinnacle gave drawings of the planned garage to the Landmarks Preservation Commission "after three hearings," it didn't submit such drawings to the city Buildings Department. This was also pointed out by DHCR, which said in its ruling, "It is also clear from the record that the Department of Buildings has not approved plans for the proposed work and that the owner has not yet had them drawn."

Merz told the Eagle, "I have always been opposed to the destruction of the fabric of the courtyard, which was part and parcel of the design of the building. Even though a garden is promised, the plan requires that the old-growth trees be uprooted."

The venerable development's open space, Merz continued, "has deteriorated over the years because of incursions, like parking, that were illegal. They never had a curb cut, and had no parking approval. They began to tear apart the vestiges of the remaining garden."

Judy Stanton, executive director of the Brooklyn Heights Association, said, "Nothing would make me happier and would be better for the Brooklyn Heights Historic District than to know that the garage can't be built. If that ruling holds, it would rescue [original developer] Alfred Tredway White's history and everyone else who cares about the history of Brooklyn Heights."

Of last year's ruling by Landmarks that approved the garage, she said, "That was not a good decision by Landmarks."

John Lillienthal, a legal worker with Collins Dobkin Miller, a law firm that was engaged by the Riverside tenants, said, "I think it's a great victory, not just for the tenants of Riverside but as a matter of public policy."

Not only does the decision prevent the landlord from "putting a commercial garage under the tenants' feet," he said, "it saves eight to 12 old-growth trees, many of which are over 100 years old. A tree grows in Brooklyn, but someone has to protect it."

Speaking on behalf of the Riverside Tenants Association, William Ringler said, "This state decision is good for all city rent-regulated tenants who have garden areas that owners may want to remove for their profit. It is also good for tree preservationists and ecologically-minded citizens. We feel confident the DHCR will not overturn this ruling on appeal."

The plan for the underground garage, which would house fewer than 100 cars, replaced an earlier plan that would have constructed a two-story garage, with one floor below ground and one above. That plan was disapproved by Landmarks.



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The Riverside Apartments were built in 1890 by philanthropist and businessman Alfred Tredway White as an alternative for working people to the then-common "old-law" tenements that offered little light, air or open space. When the buildings were constructed, they had their own park, playground, bathhouse and music pavilion.



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