

Dear Councilmember Thao,

As residents of Ward 1, we write to you with the sincere request that you deny the appeal by Sullivan Property Investments of the HPC ruling regarding a proposed second triplex at 540 Portland Avenue.

We have lived on the 500 block of Portland Avenue since 2013 and were drawn here by the prospect of a bicycle-, pedestrian- and transit-friendly routine. We have consciously chosen to live in other densely built neighborhoods in Minneapolis and St. Paul prior to this.

Suggestions that Portland Avenue neighbors object to diversity or density or smart development are unfounded. For our part, we have chosen to live here precisely for the mix of all of these, and for how well and how long the neighborhood has integrated these elements with the goal of preserving urban history and heritage.

What's really at issue here is **an outsized development proposal and a design process that effectively bypassed the immediate neighborhood.**

1. The size and design of the proposed project are fundamentally out of step with neighborhood character and long-range city plans. Does a city committed to reducing auto dependency really need a triplex with three garages and three car lifts? Does a city committed to building more housing that's accessible to persons with low incomes, persons with disabilities, and families with children really need a building with so much garage space and so little living and green space? With a request for six variances, this project is clearly too big for its location.

2. The process of engaging the neighborhood in planning and feedback has been flawed from the start. The developer waited for over a year before offering to meet with neighbors, provide information and hear feedback. Since then, he has misrepresented neighborhood sentiment and has rebuffed invitations from neighborhood groups to discuss the project.

An example: In the days immediately following the September 26 informational meeting with surprised neighbors who had just learned about the project and how it was headed for final HPC and BZA approval, the developer visited the neighborhood and came away with seventeen "letters of support." The misrepresentation here is that these are, in fact, no more than a few hastily scribbled words (most are 12 words or less) on a one-page form bearing an oversimplified and flattering depiction of the proposed building. Only one letter is from a resident of the block in question. Each of these is now counted among the developer's much-vaunted Letters of Support, including the one which reads, in its entirety, "Love the design!" To present these as evidence of substantive neighborhood support is fundamentally misleading.

The Heritage Preservation Commission, at its December 14 meeting, listened to the neighborhood, to urban history experts and to the HPC's three architect members. Commissioners acknowledged the developer's failure to engage the community from the beginning of this project, reversed their initial decision to approve, and recommended that the developer work more closely with neighbors on revisions to the plan.

We now ask you to do the same: acknowledge that there should be direct community input involving surrounding neighbors, and acknowledge that this plan needs further work in order to be designed and sized appropriately for the neighborhood. We ask that you deny the developer's appeal. We welcome the opportunity to work closely with the developer for a design that is more right-sized, meets HPC guidelines, and is a better fit within the long-range plans for the city of St. Paul.

Sincerely and with thanks for your attention,

Dan Chouinard and John Sularz
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