

John Sularz & Dan Chouinard
550 Portland Avenue
St. Paul, MN 55102

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Planning & Economic Development
25 4th St. W #1400
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RE: Proposed Second Triplex Development at 540 Portland Avenue

To whom it may concern:

As residents of Portland Avenue who moved into the Historic Hill District neighborhood seven years ago, we have seen numerous improvements in the houses on our street. Several formerly stressed properties have been spruced up or meticulously restored. So we are distressed to see, at this late date in the process, plans for this proposed housing development at 540 Portland Avenue which will take our neighborhood in the wrong direction.

We strongly oppose the current design of this project for these reasons:

- **Development is substantially oversized for both property and location in neighborhood.**
 - It is clear from the unusually large number and the extremity of variances being requested that this development is oversized for its location on the lot and in relation to the surrounding buildings.
 - ***Implication: Allowing this project to proceed would negatively impact the neighborhood, and would set a precedent for other oversized properties to be built within the neighborhood.***

- **Development design oriented toward Summit Avenue is detrimental to neighborhood cohesion on several counts:**
 - Oriented to Summit but not a Summit property. The development is not located on Summit Avenue but acts as if it is. This proposed development with a Portland address faces away from Portland and fronts directly on the rear lot line of its Summit Avenue neighbor.
 - Current 540 Portland owner has no control over Summit owner's use of land directly in "front" of proposed development. Currently, there is lawn furniture and trees/shrubs on the Summit property that would block the view of this new triplex from Summit. Current designs which show it having a clear view of Summit are misleading. The owner of the Summit property could build a fence, plant trees, build a small building in front of this development and block the view.
 - Placement of development in middle of the block contributes to congested and incohesive look. The proposed development exhibits none of the characteristics of typical backyard buildings—carriage houses and garages—of this neighborhood. Its

false-front orientation to Summit Avenue creates aesthetic confusion at least, and the possibility of real danger at worst, in the event that emergency responders arriving at the building find no access from Summit and no clearly defined entrance on Portland Avenue.

- ***Implication: Orienting the development toward Summit will not harmonize with surrounding buildings and will compromise, rather than enhance, the general look and appeal of Summit Avenue and the block as a whole.***
- **This proposed development will significantly exacerbate an already stressed on-street parking situation.**
 - The lack of on-street parking is a well-known and longstanding issue on Portland Avenue where parking is only allowed on one side of the street. No variance should be considered.
 - The proposed hydraulic lifts in the garage of the new development look good on paper, but the reality of coordinating moving cars in and out of the garage will be problematic for most people. In all likelihood, people will simply park on the street instead of coordinating moving cars up and down on the lift every morning and evening.
 - ***Implication: This proposed project would make inadequate on-street parking for current residents in our neighborhood worse instead of better.***
- **Lack of green space on new property brings water management issues, as well as aesthetic concerns.**
 - Except for a small strip of grass on the building's periphery, plans call for a massive structure and hardscaping over nearly all the remaining property.
 - ***Implication: Rainwater management and environmental concerns, as well as aesthetic issues, arise with this housing development and its parking lot.***
- **Neglect by current owner (property issues & lack of communication)**
 - Property issues (photos included at end of this document): There is significant erosion on either side of the front cement stairs, a significant portion of the boulevard is dirt (not grass), dirt covers at least half of the front sidewalk (which is muddy when it rains), poorly maintained rock area around tree on boulevard with haphazard placement of bricks, ill-maintained retaining wall and negligent snow removal in the winter. It is said that the greatest indicator of *future* performance is *past* performance, and this property owner clearly has an issue with keeping his property well-maintained. Architect Carlos Perez asserts that the property issues will be taken care of with the new project; however, they should have been taken care of years ago. The past and current inability to maintain the property is a clear warning that a potential new property will not be properly maintained.
 - Owner's lack of communication with neighbors: Mr. Perez states that an attempt was made to reach out to neighbors about the project months ago; however, news of the project came as a surprise to neighbors on Portland Avenue via a letter received on or about September 11, 2020 from the St. Paul BZA, not from the owner.

- ***Implication: Lack of communication with neighbors and poorly maintained property reinforce that this project is more of a revenue stream for the owner rather than an opportunity to be a good neighbor and contribute to the neighborhood with a design that enhances rather than overpowers its immediate surroundings.***

We would welcome the opportunity to continue this discussion. We know of no neighbors within the vicinity of the proposed housing development who support it in its current form.

Respectfully,

John Sularz & Dan Chouinard

Enclosure: Photos of 540 Portland Avenue property and Summit Avenue property



540 Portland Avenue:
Poorly maintained
boulevard.

Top photo shows erosion
of boulevard dirt into the
street.

Bottom photo shows
close up of poorly
maintained brick
surround at base of tree,
as well as erosion in front
yard.





540 Portland Avenue:

Significant erosion in front yard.

Top photo shows erosion on either side of front stairs, with dirt spreading onto sidewalk.

Bottom photo shows sidewalk covered in dirt due to erosion. It has been like this for years.





View of 540 Portland Avenue property from Summit Avenue:

Top photo shows distant view of property line (where the fence is currently located).

Bottom photo shows close up of Summit owner's patio furniture, trees and shrubs (some located on Summit property).

