

# Pitt, residents at odds over Schenley Farms

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Keep two concepts in mind — unnecessary red tape and much-needed protection — because they are central to a debate now being waged between a Schenley Farms civic group and some of Pittsburgh's most respected institutions.

The institutions — including the University of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Board of Education — have entered a fray over whether buildings and land they manage in Oakland should be included in a proposed historic district.

They say such a designation would leave them facing a costly layer of red tape that eventually could discourage renovating or building in the area.

That bureaucratic layer is the Historic Review Commission, a city board created two years ago to ensure that building projects and modifications in historic districts will not destroy the historical integrity of buildings or districts.

Proposed projects in the city's

three historic districts — Manchester, Market Square and the Mexican War Streets — are reviewed by HRC, the city planning commission and City Council, and must receive approval from all three before they move forward.

The citizens, led by Darrell Stigler, spokesman for the Schenley Farms Civic Association, say that historic designation in an area of Oakland dominated by institutional structures is crucial for two reasons.

If the area is designated historic, it will offer citizens a chance to express their ideas about restoration and renewal projects at HRC hearings, ensuring them a voice in matters that might otherwise be private.

Also, if the irregularly shaped parcel — drawn around major landmarks such as the Western Pennsylvania School for the Blind to the north; St. Paul's Cathedral and Mellon Institute to the east; Carnegie

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Institute to the south; and Syria Mosque to the west — is declared historic, its aesthetic qualities will be guaranteed for future generations of Pittsburghers.

But also important to the debate is a subject that the participants seem to shy away from because of its volatility.

The University of Pittsburgh ardently wants a hotel in its general vicinity. The hotel would provide more seminar space and, of course, needed rooms for visitors to the university who now either shuttle to the school from Downtown hotels or — worse — do not come at all.

At present, there are just two hotels in Oakland — Howard Johnson's on the Boulevard of the Allies and the University Inn on Forbes. Several studies, including the Oakland Plan, have cited a need for additional hotel rooms in the area.

While saying they have no problems with the idea of a hotel, the citizens want to make sure that any structure built will not damage the integrity of the residential neighborhood that stands near it.

Their concern is heightened by present plans for a hotel on two parcels of land behind Syria Mosque and the Masonic Temple on Bigelow Boulevard, across the street from the Schenley Farms neighborhood. No details on the size of the hotel, to be built on land leased to the Beynon Co., have been released.

Historic districts are governed by city Ordinance 20, enacted in 1979. The ordinance provides for the designation of districts and structures as historic; regulates exterior alterations and developments; and, in theory at least, protects historic districts by allowing citizens to participate in important development issues.

A historic district is one at which events of national, state, or local historical significance occurred, one which contains more than one historic structure, or one that reflects, in aggregate, an architectural period, style or movement.

The civic association has fought, and stands on the verge of winning, a two-year effort to have its neighborhood — roughly bounded by Centre Avenue, Bigelow Boulevard and Parkman Avenue — declared a historic district. The HRC and the city planning commission have approved the proposal.

The proposal still needs City Council approval.

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# Farms at odds on historic designation



Joyce Mendelsohn/Post-Gazette

of Learning dominates the scene in the Schenley Farms neighborhood.

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chairman of HRC, were separated be guidelines would ap ment and rehabilit-

ation plans in the two districts.

When the historic commission meets Friday afternoon to consider for the second time whether a historic district should be created, the issues will have changed little, if at all.

Jay Roling, the assistant to the vice chancellor for public affairs at Pitt, said recently that the historic legislation really wasn't written for institutional sectors, such as Oakland's. In such districts, he argued, owners already are "maintaining the architectural quality of buildings."

Roling said many of the buildings that would be included in the historic district — such as the Cathedral of Learning, Heinz Chapel and St. Paul's Cathedral — already are on state, and in some case, national historic registers. He questioned, why, if the buildings are in such good condition, a historic district is needed to protect them.

In addition, Roling said the legislation, which requires building owners and developers to take plans to the HRC, the planning commission and the City Council before proceeding, is "imposing."

Edward Smuts, the project manager for the proposed hotel, said that while he has no position on the forming of a district, there does not seem to be a need for HRC review of projects.

He said the planning commission can handle all the questions raised with a proposed development, saving developers time and money.

In addition, there is the lingering question asked by Hunt Martin, facilities manager for the Pittsburgh Board of Education: Who does this district actually benefit?

Though he would not answer his question, it is clear many of the institutions believe the Schenley Farms Civic Association will be the benefactor.

Should a district be created, the group would have a voice at HRC hearings on planned developments next to its neighborhood, the most-publicized and imminent of which is the hotel.

Stigler said the designation is important because it would provide for citizen involvement. He said this is important because Pitt, for one, has not always been sensitive in its handling of architectural issues.

Stigler is particularly critical of Pitt's failure to take care of a house at 4200 Centre Ave. in Schenley Farms. According to Stigler, the house was once one of the nation's finest examples of Tudor architecture. MR 4 82

The university had bought the house and planned for it to be a fraternity house. After a small fire, the structure eventually was razed, Stigler said.

Pitt administrators' primary reason for not wanting a district is simply that they do not want "any guiding influence in its design and expansion plans. They don't want people telling them that what they are going to do is going to destroy the area," Stigler said.

But historic designation appears to be forthcoming if statements from Joan Ivey, the chairman of the HRC board, are any indication. In a recent interview, she rebutted most the arguments made against the proposal.

Ivey said that HRC review does not needlessly slow the approval process. The entire process, including HRC, city planning and City Council reviews, takes an average of two months, she said.

She added that frequently, when proposals are adequately documented, the HRC approves them on the day they first are introduced.

The HRC has not been an insurmountable obstacle to developers. In 1981 the HRC approved all 40 proposals that came before it.

Ivey disputed Smuts' argument that the planning commission should handle the HRC function.

"The planning commission does not have historical expertise," she said. "If it could handle that, there would be no need for HRC."

Designation of a district would be important, Ivey said, because besides reviewing modifications to buildings, the commission would hear plans for development of new buildings on vacant parcels.

"Without a district, there is potential to put up whatever you want, and that one building could destroy the integrity of a historic district," she said.

While the issue will not be settled Friday, it is likely that when the commission meets in April, the Oakland institutional district will be the fifth in the city to be recommended for historical designation.