

Washington Square West Civic Association
1100 Walnut St.
MOB Room B113
Philadelphia, PA 19107

June 13, 2024

Philadelphia Historical Commission
1515 Arch Street, 13th Floor
Philadelphia, PA 19102
preservation@phila.gov

RE: Support for Historic District Designation for Washington Square West

Dear Dr. Farnham and Commissioners,

Thank you for your review of the application for Historic District designation for Washington Square West. We look forward to the meeting tomorrow and are hopeful for your support to designate our unique neighborhood as a Historic District.

We represent the Washington Square West Civic Association and its Board, co-sponsors with the Preservation Alliance of this nomination. Since a few residents have recently expressed concern about the extent of community engagement and the time for review of this application, we felt it might be helpful to review the outreach and community engagement we facilitated. **The facts in this letter will reveal key arguments against the nomination to be untrue. Specifically, inadequate notice and the view that designating individual properties has been effective.**

Community engagement was extensive. Over the last few years, we conducted a series of public meetings on the proposed nomination. Schedule A provides the details of each point of public engagement. In particular, a series of public panel discussions in the Spring of 2021 were community meetings dedicated solely to the proposed Historic District application. These were well attended. We have registers of the questions and answers from these sessions. The panel discussion and presentations at these meetings included a review of other historic districts; significant historical properties that were razed in Wash West; examples of the development and repurposing of historical properties in neighboring districts; and the process by which the nomination would be completed and presented to the Commission.

Our monthly meetings are public, and the minutes are published on our website. Our ePost newsletter contained regular messages on the nomination and the process. The distribution list for our newsletter exceeds 1,700 community members

and the average opening rate is 800-900.

There have been regular updates to the community on the status of the application in social media posts, not only on our own sites but on the Washington Square West Community pages to reach neighbors who may not be on our Association's contact list.

Regarding the historical designation of individual properties, we are grateful that many properties are already designated as such. However, it has also been repeatedly proven that this process is not effective by itself. The number of historically significant and contributing properties in the neighborhood makes individual designation ineffective. During the public panel discussions held in 2021, specific examples were reviewed with pictures and stories of the properties. These included demolitions of the gayborhood garage at 11th and Cypress Street and the Henry Minton House/12th Street Gym at 204 South 12th Street. The fabric of the neighborhood is not defined – or preserved – by individual properties.

We respect each of our community members and differing opinions on matters that we address as a Board.

Having had deep community engagement and completing careful consideration of the input and implications of this proposal, we reiterate our belief that this designation is right for Washington Square West and the City of Philadelphia.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Tami Sortman, President
Marisa Shaaban, Vice President
Drew Moyer, Secretary
Robert Sher, Treasurer

cc: Councilmember Mark Squilla
Paul Steinke

SCHEDULE A – Public Meetings

1. March 10, 2020 – In-person informational session at Jefferson Bluemle Life Sciences Bldg. Paul Steinke, Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia, discussed historic districts and the potential preservation of the historic integrity of Washington Sq. West.
2. January 12, 2021 – Senator Nikil Saval facilitated a Q&A session with community members and agreed to emphasize preservation rather than demolition. Senator Saval noted that his office has a full-time staff person to work on advocacy. The Senator committed his focus and support for this initiative.
3. Feb. 9, 2021 - The Preservation Task Force, a committee of community members established by the Board, provided an update on the preservation initiative. All from the WSW community are invited and encouraged to engage in discussions to share concerns and input. This is a working/learning group. Options including a temporary demolition moratorium, were briefly discussed after having been mentioned as a recourse.
4. March 9, 2021 – The Preservation Task Force is arranging panel discussions on the Historic District to be held via Zoom. The goal is to involve the community in this discussion. A statement regarding the goal of the Task Force is being developed.
5. April 6, 2021 – Community conversation regarding preservation and the Historic District project. The moderator was Senator Nikil Saval. Panelists were Paul Steinke, Faye Anderson, Scott Donahue and Aaron Wunsch.
6. May 4, 2021 - Community conversation regarding preservation and the Historic District project. The moderator was Starr Herr-Cardillo. Panelists were Paul Steinke, Dr. Jonathan Farnham and Councilmember Mark Squilla.
7. June 6, 2021 - Community conversation regarding preservation and the Historic District project. The Moderator was Michael Hinson Jr. Panelists were Paul Steinke, Nicole Koedyker and Andrew Palewski.

8. June 8, 2021 – Reported that a preservation page will be added to the WSW website.

9. September 14, 2021 – Report on the preservation effort including the process by which a preservation task force, now the Preservation Committee, was formed and is composed of Board members and community members. The purpose of the Committee is to discover the pros and cons of a WSW Historic District. Three public panels were staffed and composed of experts in the field of preservation. These public panels were offered to the community via Zoom. Next steps require a board vote to pursue the effort. A motion was made to reconvene the working group to research what steps need to be taken, contact the Historical Commission and present these steps and formal proposal/recommendation to the community.

10. October 12, 2021 – Reported to the community that the Preservation Committee continues to meet weekly. They are in conversations with the Historical Commission. There will be updates.

11. November 9, 2021 - Annual Meeting – Catalina Gonzalez, Vice President, reported on the work being conducted through a committee which had been established to review the proposed nomination and provide related education for the community. Six directors were elected including those whose support for the Historical District was included in their statement of interest as nominees.

12. March 8, 2022 – Councilmember Squilla attended and responded to questions by members regarding trash pickup, recycling, and efforts to obtain Historic Designation for Washington Square West by the Philadelphia Historical Commission.

13. March 14, 2022 – Special Meeting regarding the historical preservation efforts for Washington Square West. Facilitated by the WSW Preservation Committee comprised of Eight (8) community members. The guests were Paul Steinke and Emily Cooperman.

14. May 10, 2022 - Joe Pappalardo, Treasurer, provided a report of income and expenses compared to budget for the first quarter. There was discussion surrounding income from dues, contributions and restricted contributions for the Historic District designation project.

15. June 14, 2022 – The Treasurer reported that Historic District fundraising was completed at \$13,500 for this phase of the project. The Preservation Committee reported that the nomination application report phase is now in progress.

16. September 13, 2022 – Special guests were Mr. David Brigham of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (the “HSP” or “Society”) and Erin Paulson of the HSP preservation team. Mr. Brigham extended an invitation for members to attend a September 17 walking tour entitled, “Philadelphia: The Black Metropolis.” Members and the Board engaged in conversation with Mr. Brigham regarding community history and preservation.

17. Dec 13, 2022 – A report was provided on the remapping project restarted with the City Planning Commission. The objectives of the project include protection for the fabric of the community. The Board and Councilmember want to ensure that the neighborhood is fully engaged on this project. Questions were raised regarding the difference between the Historic District designation project and this remapping project. Mr. Broh explained that the Planning Commission and the Philadelphia Historical Commission are separate organizations, and these are independent projects. Questions were raised and further discussion occurred surrounding various sources and levels of restriction that apply to community development. Ms. Low noted the consistency of the remapping objectives with the intent of historical preservation.

18. January 10, 2023 - Mr. Broh introduced Philadelphia Planning Commissions guests Mason Austin and Ian Litwin. He described the remapping project and provided background on previous meetings and the launch of this project prior to the Covid pandemic in 2020. The Planning Commission and the Association would like to maximize community input to the project and encouraged attendees to inform other residents. Goals reviewed included the protection of the rowhome fabric.

19. May 9, 2023 – Reported that the consultant is finishing their review of the Historic District application.
20. Oct. 10, 2023 - Mr. Broh covered a topic relating to the Historical District application. Any property in the Historic District that was originally permitted for commercial use and is over 2,500 sq ft would be allowed any use currently permissible in CMX-3 districts. This has created a concern regarding the potential for visitor accommodation (AirBnb) usage for hundreds of dwelling units in the neighborhood. The Zoning Committee is collaborating with the Councilperson's office to address this issue. Further action on this will include a public hearing. Ms. Sortman reported that the Historic District application was submitted to the Philadelphia Historical Commission and is under review. The Association and the Preservation Alliance are working to address PHC comments, primarily relating to images used in the application.
21. January 9, 2023 – The President reported on the Historic District application and recent progress made by the Preservation Alliance. The Preservation Alliance confirmed that all corrections requested from the initial review by the Philadelphia Historical Commission were addressed and the application was resubmitted to PHC.
22. February 13, 2024 - Ms. Sortman reported on the Historic District application and that revised paperwork was approved by the Philadelphia Historical Commission. The next step will be sending out letters to all property owners. A public hearing will be held 30 days following notification of property owners by mail.
23. April 9, 2024 – It was reported that the Philadelphia Historical Commission sent out letters to property owners on March 21, 2024, regarding the application for Washington Square West to become designated as a Historic District. There were comments and questions from the community members on the Historic District application and implications.
24. May 14, 2024 – The monthly meeting of the Association included a discussion of the Historic District Designation. Paul Steinke of the Preservation Alliance and Laura DiPasquale and Heather Hendrickson from the Historical Commission participated and answered questions from the community.