



Providence

Drive under way in Wayland Sq. to preserve '50s office building

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By Daniel Barbarisi

Journal Staff Writer



City Councilman Seth Yurdin, left, opposes demolition of the former United Way headquarters at Waterman Street and Wayland Avenue, which has been purchased by developers who want to tear it down.

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PROVIDENCE — The city's preservationists are well known for their defense of the 18th- and 19th-century architecture lining Benefit Street, and the historic mills that dot the city.

The death of a hulking brick office building from the 1950s, meanwhile, would not normally inspire impassioned resistance.

But in Wayland Square, the looming demolition of the United Way headquarters building has aroused preservationists and the area's councilman to preserve the 42,000 square-foot office building, while making arguments that the 1950s are becoming historic after all.

"As mid-20th century modern buildings, like 229 Waterman Street, continue to age, they are becoming more valued and appreciated. In Providence, we have comparatively few from this era and they deserve the same protections as 19th-century mill buildings," wrote Victoria Veh, executive director of the Providence Preservation

Society, in a letter supporting preservation of the building.

United Way sold the building in October for \$4.3 million to RI Acquisitions, a partnership of developers Andrew Rockett and Charles Irving. United Way is moving to a new headquarters in Olneyville. The new owners plan to knock down the building and build a stand-alone structure there, most likely a pharmacy.

City Councilman Seth Yurdin has filed a bill placing the building in the city's Industrial Commercial Buildings District, which would grant it numerous protections and force the developer to gain approval from the city's Historic District Commission before demolishing it. The building's placement on the list was approved by the council's Ordinance Committee Monday night and will be heard by the full council at a special meeting tomorrow.

"I was concerned that the building serves as an anchor for Wayland Square," Yurdin said, explaining why he wants it protected.

The building, erected in 1948-1949 as the What Cheer Mutual Fire Insurance Co. Building, is a brick and limestone, flat-roof office building that the preservation society described as a "good example of the conservative corporate modernism of 1950s Providence commercial architecture."

Robert I. Stolzman, a lawyer representing the developer, said that RI Acquisitions has already invested money in the project and purchased it with the understanding that the building could be torn down.

And the additional review that placing the building in the ICBD would require is unnecessary, Stolzman said. The City Plan Commission already requires an extensive review process, he said.

At the same time, he said the developer recognizes the impact that corner has on the neighborhood.

"We understand the importance of the corner and we'll do a nice project," he said.

But he said the building does not deserve this level of protection — it is not, as the statute states, a critically important building to the historic fabric of the city, Stolzman said.

"It's not a bad building, but this is not one of the critically historic buildings that one would consider a landmark," he said.

Even advocates for the building's preservation acknowledged that protecting this building may seem strange at first glance.

"This large two-story brick and limestone office structure does not immediately evoke the image of an historically or architecturally significant building," said Daisy Schenepel, president of the Fox Point Neighborhood Association, in a letter to the city. She noted, however, that preservationists nationwide are beginning to recognize the significance of 1950s commercial architecture.

Joseph Lemus, who lives several blocks away on Rhode Island Avenue, said the building has been an important part of the neighborhood for decades now.

"It may not be an architectural gem, but I think it has merit," he said, adding that what goes there afterward is just as relevant.

"We're interested in protecting the quality of life for people in the neighborhood. We've heard that some of the development proposals for that site include a drugstore. Within 100 yards of that site there are two drugstores."

What is built after the United Way building is gone may be at the crux of the issue for some.

Robert Azar, director of current planning for the city, said that Providence's interest is in making sure that this important part of Wayland Square is home to a structure consistent with the mixed-use, office and street-retail area around it; that could be accomplished with the current building or with a new building that holds the corner

equally well.

“There should be created something that is at least as good, if not better, than what’s already there,” Azar said.

“Another building, sensitively designed, well-placed at this property could also do that,” Azar said.

Stolzman said that the developer will meet with city planners and Yurdin and discuss their options before the council formally takes up the matter.

dbarbari@projo.com