

LAURELHURST'S HISTORIC MOMENT:

To SAVE or to DEMOLISH, That IS the question

Protecting one of Portland's most intact historic neighborhoods from radical change has new urgency

Submitted by **friends of Laurelhurst Historic District**

With century-old houses, tree-lined streets, sandstone arches, a central circle and grand park, Laurelhurst is one of the West Coast's most historically significant planned communities. And for the last 100 years, not much has changed. Original homes large and small still exist side-by-side while mature trees provide a leafy canopy.

But the neighborhood's character is poised to change imminently and radically due to new city of Portland zoning overlay rules intended to double density in neighborhoods such as Laurelhurst. In response, a growing coalition of neighbors is championing an old idea—historic designation—with new enthusiasm. Their challenge? To balance the rights of neighbors, the needs of an evolving city,



and a shared historic legacy that belongs to every Oregonian.

New pressures, new rules

Across our metropolitan region, housing pressures have been building for years. Portland's striking landscape and vibrant culture attract some 40,000 new residents a year. This demand has driven home prices inexorably upward, making Portland the leading domestic market for infill investors, in what



amounts to a powerful force shaping local politics.

Portland's City Council has responded with new zoning overlays that reinterpret infill rules that will take effect in 2017. For Laurelhurst, these rules allow for the construction of triplexes and duplexes on every street—and 45 neighborhood lots have been re-zoned to allow six-plexes after demolition.

Until now, Laurelhurst has been largely insulated from the demolition epidemic

affecting most Portland neighborhoods. Around eighty homes have been completely or mostly demolished of the 1,800 houses in the district. But without new protections, say concerned observers, the coming tsunami of change could run roughshod over history and livability without improving affordability.

“The infill proposal makes housing less affordable while subsidizing developer profits, as the increased demands on classrooms, parking etc. will be put on taxpayers” says Laurelhurst resident Keith Comess.

Laurelhurst resident Sara Reed agrees: “Demolishing historic single-family

homes and replacing them with multiple units sold for \$800,000 will not solve an affordability crisis, while the damage to our history will be permanent.”

Neighbors also worry that the well-intentioned changes could markedly alter the character of the neighborhood—with the loss of small historic homes and mature trees, the incongruity of towering multi-family units on every block, increased parking pressures, and the inability of neighborhood schools to meet new demands.

“For generations, people have been attracted to Laurelhurst because of its special character and beauty,” said

resident Tanya Baikow-Smith. “Once that is lost, it is lost forever—not just for me and my family but for every generation to follow.”

Protecting a shared legacy

When neighbors learned of plans to tear down the landmark property at the neighborhood's western gates and replace it with three mass-produced infill units, they united behind efforts to save and re-imagine the home while honoring its historic significance.

“Renovation can be historically sensitive and meet a neighborhood's natural need to evolve,” said Monica McQueen, McCulloch Foundation spokesperson, who applauds neighbors' consideration of historic designation. “It's inspiring to see neighbors uniting to save not just one historic house from demolition but a whole neighborhood.”

Landmark status

Laurelhurst is particularly, uniquely historic. The neighborhood is a wholly planned turn-of-the-century community, the brainchild of Frederick Law Olmsted, America's most celebrated landscape architect and urban planner. His firm designed New York's Central Park, the White House grounds, and parks and campuses across the continent.

Olmsted designed not only Laurelhurst and its park but also nearly our entire urban parks system, giving Portland more parks per capita than any major city in the world. He also designed Portland's 1905 Lewis and Clark Exposition, which brought the city to national prominence.



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