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Late Backup

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August 8, 2013

To: Mayor Lee Leffingwell, Mayor Pro-tem Sheryl Cole and Council Members

Regarding: Case # C814-2012-0160-211 South Lamar Boulevard Planned Unit Development

I have devoted many years to serving as a community volunteer in planning for our city. I believe that for any plan to succeed in sustaining the vitality and economic health of a city, historic preservation must be a key element in its framework. I am sometimes before you speaking for Preservation Austin, which I currently serve as 2nd Vice President and as Co-chair of the Historic Preservation Committee. However, this letter is not written as a representative of that organization, but on my own behalf as an individual citizen.

Along with many other preservationists in Austin, I am dismayed and saddened at the effect that this proposed development will have on the historic context of the Paggi House, possibly Austin's oldest building. Situated on a bluff overlooking the river, the house and its setting tell the story of Austin's earliest days as a river city. It was there that weary travelers attempted the only low-water river crossing to Austin, or found shelter for the night if the river ran too high. It stood as the only outpost in the vicinity, and the development of the entire Barton Springs area arose from the home's original plantation tract.

The developers proposing this project have made adjustments in their plans to give some space and visual access to the Paggi House itself, which is a benefit not required by their zoning. And if this project doesn't happen, there is nothing to require any other project to offer this much. The point I want to make is that it is likely much too late to provide this landmark sufficient protection, from this project or any other that might be proposed for this site. That is because when the Paggi House was designated as a City Historic Landmark, the City neglected to include the Paggi House viewshed to the river as part of its designation.

The Paggi House is a classic example of the need to preserve historic structures in their context because its relationship to the river is an essential part of its importance to the history of Austin. This case argues for the urgent need to assure that we don't make that kind of mistake in the future. I believe that we must ensure that important landmarks are not hidden or marginalized by large-scale developments by framing future historic zoning cases in a way that protects the historic context and landscapes of buildings when that is necessary for interpreting their historic value.

The city could address this needed policy change through upcoming revisions to the land development code. Currently, our code contains very few provisions that require new buildings to be compatible with adjacent historic places. I suggest that you enact the recommendation of the Downtown Austin Plan (DAP) that says "Standards and policies should be strengthened to ensure that new development respects the scale and character of historic buildings, districts and landscapes." As also specified in the Downtown Plan, form-based development standards could be used to protect and complement the unique character of historic buildings, streets and districts. While the tract in question is outside the DAP boundaries, I believe it is important that we make provisions for the impact of these large-scaled developments on historic structures both inside and outside our central business district.

I am grateful for all you do to protect our historic assets, and I urge you to take necessary steps to safeguard them from the increasing pressure for development in our historic city center.

Respectfully,
Lin Team