

# BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

February 13, 2019

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[bostonpreservation.org](http://bostonpreservation.org)

Mr. Michael Sinatra  
Boston Planning and Development Agency  
Boston City Hall  
Boston, MA 02201  
Re: Hotel Alexandra, South End Landmark District

Dear Mr. Sinatra,

The Boston Preservation Alliance is Boston's primary, non-profit advocacy organization that protects and promotes the use of historic buildings and landscapes in all of the city's neighborhoods. With 40 Organizational Members, 125 Corporate Members, and a reach of 35,000 friends and supporters we represent a diverse constituency advocating for the thoughtful evolution of the city and celebration of its unique character. We appreciate the opportunity to offer comments on projects that impact the historic character of the city.

The Alliance has had the opportunity to review the project, attend Boston Civic Design Commission hearings (one jointly with the South End Landmark District Commission), and to meet with the proponent directly to discuss the project. Though the proposed height of the new building does not meet the standards and guidelines for the Landmark district, we feel in this unique circumstance we could accept the complete restoration of the two outward facades of the iconic Hotel Alexandra as acceptable justification for the additional height. However we do have concerns and recommendations for the proposal.

The Hotel Alexandra has been vacant and deteriorating for over 30 years, creating a challenge for any redevelopment on this site that strives to retain the historic building. Several unsuccessful attempts have been made in the past, challenged in particular by the relatively small floor-plate available to offset the significant restoration cost. We fear that if this proposal also fails to move forward, time is scarce to save these historic facades. Therefore we feel an obligation to participate in the collaboration with the South End Landmark District Commission and the proponent to guide the most appropriate development possible for this site. We believe all involved share our concern to carefully balance restoration and new construction, assuring that the prominence of this local treasure is enhanced rather than weakened. It must be understood and put on record that this is a unique situation and should not be considered precedent for future proposals within the historic district, especially for interior sites in the district without similar scale nearby. Because of the site's corner location and the prominence of the Alexandra, as well as the community's long-held desire to save the building, we are able to support the proposed façade project. But

this is not a method of “preservation” that is typically acceptable and should be utilized only as a last resort.

While we support the concept of the proposal, we do have several concerns. We agree with remarks made by both BCDC and SELDC members that the tower needs to be set back significantly from the Washington Street façade of the Alexandra to give the sense of an occupied space in the original building. We were pleased to see this alteration in the most recent iteration. It is important not only to give prominence to the historic façade but to avoid the appearance that the new building is merely pasted onto the existing facade. The Hotel Alexandra should visually stand on its own with the new construction articulated as an independent building behind it. We feel that the deeper setback helps accomplish this design necessity.

Though we understand that the design of the new construction is still evolving and we are pleased with the direction the project is moving, we feel it is important to note that the design is not yet contextual to the historic architecture in the neighborhood. While the design should not attempt to mimic or replicate historic materials or details, it should be in dialogue with the masonry and copper materials surrounding the site rather than completely foreign to it. The infill portion of the building at the street level which replaces the demolished Ivory Bean building requires particular sensitivity to its neighbors. We encourage the proponent to be more sensitive to the colors, materials, and articulation of the Alexandra itself in the new design.

Additionally, we echo concerns expressed by commissioners about the blank party wall that faces Dudley Square. It is important that all facades of the building be exceptionally well designed. We feel that it might be appropriate, in this unique situation, to allow a mural concept on this new construction that engages South End and Roxbury residents, creating a visual connection between the two neighborhoods rather than a wall. In many ways a painted mural is advantageous to a permanent architectural feature because the design on this prominent façade can be changed over time if needed, providing more flexibility and dynamism. If allowed, the mural should never be an advertisement for the hotel itself but a depiction or abstraction that is representative of the residents of these neighborhoods thus creating the sense of local “ownership” of a hotel building, which is traditionally considered reserved for the use and advantage of outsiders and visitors. We support the idea of adding more windows to that façade as well as the required variance.

The expressed expectation is that, in exchange for the necessary height and variances to make this project successful, the proponent will fully and sensitively restore the two remaining facades of the Hotel Alexandra. This work should be completed to the highest preservation restoration standards, making appropriate accommodations for accessibility into the building and engagement with the public realm.

Finally, we feel this proposal should be the impetus for the City to create stronger regulations regarding neglected and abandoned buildings. It is unacceptable that this

building, a prominent and iconic structure in a protected historic district, should have been allowed to be vacant, vandalized, and exposed for decades preventing the possibility of a full rehabilitation. It is particularly troubling that the current owner (by our understanding not the proponent) will be compensated financially in some way through this project and indirectly rewarded for allowing the building to continue to deteriorate over many years. We strongly encourage the BLC, BPDA, and BCDC to work together, in partnership with advocates like the Alliance, to find a solution to this problem that is resulting in the loss of historic fabric throughout the city. Neighborhoods should not be put in the position of accepting otherwise untenable and unsupportable projects in order to save their treasured historic places. Owners should not in the end financially benefit when they have been poor stewards of Boston's heritage.

Thank you,



Greg Galer  
Executive Director

CC:

Rosanne Foley, Boston Landmarks Commission  
Nicholas Armata, Boston Landmarks Commission  
John Amodeo, South End Landmarks Commission  
David Nagahiro, CBT Architects