

May 1, 2020

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Executive Director

Gregory J. Galer, Ph.D.

Councilor Kenzie Bok
Chair, Ways & Means
Boston City Hall, One City Hall Square
Re: Budget Needs for Boston Landmarks Commission

Dear Councilor Bok,

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 39 Organizational Members, 142 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 and policies that impact the historic character of the city. Since May is Preservation Month across the country this is the perfect time to write regarding the city's funding for historic preservation.

Boston's historic fabric- everything from its street patterns to open spaces to buildings to its skyline- are crucial to the city's thriving economy, livability, and identity. This city would not be the hub that it is today without the prominence and preservation of its historic resources and the thoughtful blend of old and new. Additionally, continued use, retrofit, and adaptation of historic properties is an essential aspect of any successful environmental and carbon-neutral strategy being pursued by the City. And yet, financial support for the regulatory agency responsible for the ongoing, complicated, and critical work of historic preservation has been consistently underfunded in the City's budget. The Alliance strongly urges a significant increase to the operating budget for the Boston Landmarks Commission (BLC) for the following reasons:

- The BLC has an important regulatory role. Efficient and informed review of projects in the Zoning Article 85 process, properties proposed as new Boston Landmarks, and review of owner proposals to modify existing individual Boston Landmarks and those within the nine neighborhood Landmark Districts are necessary actions to both support neighborhoods and project proponents. The regulatory demand on the BLC in numbers of applications and therefore reviews required has been on an increasing trajectory for years, but the office has seen no significant budget adjustments in response. This demand for BLC services doesn't even consider the non-regulatory work of the City department responsible for guiding one of the Boston's most valuable assets, its historic resources.
- The work of historic preservation planners requires advanced degrees and specific experience and skill sets. The professional staff at the Boston Landmarks Commission work with the public, developers, and private property owners, make important decisions that permanently impact the future of the city and the trajectory of construction and development in all Boston neighborhoods. The

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salaries of these positions have long been woefully low in proportion to the education and skills they are required to have, to the gravity of their work, and to their peers in surrounding communities. Regular turnover in this office is in part due to the attraction of higher paying parallel positions both within City Hall and in nearby cities. The regular need to post, hire, and train new staff has greatly hampered the BLC's effectiveness and ability to accomplish its role in the past several years. Boston is one of the most historic cities in the United States and it requires a stable team of highly qualified professionals to guide its preservation efforts.

- In addition to salary adjustments to bring this department on par with its peers, the Boston Landmarks Commission needs additional staff. The workload outpaces the number of staff members and limits the initiatives that can be undertaken. Other cities that are similar to Boston in size and historic integrity are able to accomplish far more because they employ an appropriate number of staff in their preservation departments. Our department should be employing at least three additional staff members to accommodate new historic districts desired by several neighborhoods (such as Highland Park, Charlestown, and Ashmont Hill), as well proactive efforts such as survey, education, and advocacy to assure residents and other departments at City Hall receive appropriate, accurate, and professional guidance on preservation issues. For example, information on how historic properties play an essential role in today's environmental challenges, including carbon neutrality and sea level rise, is critical to the City's broader success in these priority issues. With such an abundance of historic resources in Boston, many city agencies engage with historic resources but are unable to get the professional, internal guidance they need to make informed decisions.
- The Boston Landmarks Commission requires an increase in budget to resolve a significant City liability, a backlog of dozens of pending Boston Landmark properties that have been accepted for further study, some waiting since the 1970s, that have not been completed. This backlog leaves significant historic properties vulnerable in a state of perpetual limbo, unfair to the community, to neighborhoods, to property owners, and to potential project proponents. Lack of funding to either hire consultants or to have sufficient internal staff to complete these studies must be resolved. BLC has in recent months been trying to address this backlog but ultimately find that without an increase in funding the task is near impossible, and historic resources thus remain vulnerable for years, even decades. And, properties that are clearly landmarks in everyone's eyes do not even reach this first stage of the process because it is so backed up. These are thus completely exposed to the whims of the market, forcing a reactive rather than thoughtful preservation process.
- Due to funding and staffing limitations the BLC is constantly playing defense and is challenged to provide proactive information to guide neighborhoods, property owners, or potential property purchasers. By necessity nearly always being reactive, the BLC is unable to provide the proactive planning and informative preservation guidance and services Boston should have. A particularly important

example is our lack of a modern, up-to-date comprehensive citywide survey of historic resources. Many of the survey forms we have, which describe buildings and their historic significance, are many decades old and fail to recognize aspects of history considered important today. A wide variety of historic events and segments of the population with rich and valuable parts of our heritage are poorly represented. With such inadequate documentation and mapping of our city's historic resources it is impossible to prioritize needs or advocacy efforts. Without knowing what resources we have, how many of each are extant, the conditions of the resources that remain, where these resources are, or how current challenges like climate change may impact them, it is a difficult to truly assess what should be protected or what is worthy of investment through programs like the CPA. A survey is a planning tool that could also guide developers to areas less dense with historic resources. A comprehensive study is overdue, but to be done well it needs to be fully funded and those funds should be dedicated in the City's budget.

For too long the Boston Landmarks Commission has struggled to professionally manage the resources of the city due to insufficient resources. Given the pride the city takes in its history and the real financial value history brings to the city in dollars by attracting tourists, residents, and businesses, it is time the city's budget reflected a proportionally appropriate investment in this agency.

We look forward to a discussion about how to provide for the needs of the Boston Landmarks Commission and our preservation community in the City of Boston's budget. The Alliance offers itself as a resource.

Thank you,



Greg Galer
Executive Director

CC:

Mayor Walsh, City of Boston
Councilor Annissa Essaibi George, Vice Chair, Ways & Means
Councilor Frank Baker, Ways & Means
Councilor Andrea Campbell, Ways & Means
Councilor Michael Flaherty, Ways & Means
Councilor Ed Flynn, Ways & Means
Councilor Julia Mejia, Ways & Means
Chris Cook, Chief of Environment, Energy, and Open Space
Carl Spector, Commissioner, Environment
Rosanne Foley, Executive Director, Boston Landmarks Commission
Lynn Smiledge, Chair, Boston Landmarks Commission