

BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

February 16, 2021

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Gregory J. Galer, Ph.D.

Nicholas Haney
MGH Planning and Construction
55 Fruit Street, WEH 210
Boston, MA 02114

Re: MGH's Expansion and Demolition in the Historic West End

Dear Mr. Haney:

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, 103 Corporate Members, and a reach over 100,000 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. We are joined in these comments by those signed below.

Like all of our medical institutions, Massachusetts General Hospital is an asset to the city of Boston. The medical services your colleagues provide are invaluable, as is their leadership in medical advancements. We recognize MGH's ongoing need to enhance their facility to meet the evolving demands of healthcare. With 210 years of history in the West End, MGH's choices to enhance its campus over time have had deep impacts on the neighborhood. With this long-term commitment in mind, we appreciate your team's attention to sustainability with climate change preparedness as essential elements of the planning process.

Although we are not suggesting the hospital should not continue to grow, we continue to urge the team to be more sensitive to the concerns of its neighborhood, as we have from the outset. Community organizations have maintained an ongoing dialogue and we believe that continuing this dialogue is necessary to accommodate the community's long-raised concerns, primarily the preservation of the few remaining historic buildings of the old West End.

There are core aspects of the proposal which have critical implications for the overall design and would have negative impacts on the community, which have not been fully evaluated for alternatives. In particular, the assertion that extensive underground parking is necessary across the entirety of this particular site is cited by MGH as the most significant factor in why saving and repurposing any of the three historic buildings is not viable. We continue to disagree with the hospital's claim that the buildings are too big, heavy, or unstable to move, but do recognize that a move over a proposed new parking garage below is an inordinately expensive strategy. Therefore, if there could be a reduction in the parking garage size, saving the buildings becomes

more viable. And the community believes that there may be other available parking solutions.

As a design concept, this proposal is an internally-focused superblock that fails to acknowledge the exterior experience of neighboring residents in terms of pedestrian experience, consideration of shadows on adjacent structures, and obstruction of free passage and views to the Ether Dome through the privatization and enclosure of N. Anderson Street. It is not welcoming or participatory in the vocabulary of either the West End's nor Beacon Hill's built environment and will very likely serve as justification for other large, indifferent development projects that continue to disrupt any sense of community continuity or cohesion. The insularity of the design is particularly problematic considering that three of the remaining historic buildings of the West End – representing the rich cultural history of a population which the hospital was founded to serve – are slated for demolition to make way for this proposal.

It is important to note that the community's strong desire to find a way to save one or more of these historic buildings cannot be understated. This response is exacerbated by the belief that MGH does not yet fully recognize the deep, unhealed wounds inflicted on the West End by Urban Renewal and years of subsequent, sustained demolition and destruction of the residents' memories and shared experiences. We are looking to MGH to be a partner willing to work with the West End community to address an almost PTSD-like response to the trauma of this neighborhood. We feel that the proposal has not yet sufficiently responded to neighborhood design concerns and that the most recent designs have, instead, evolved in the wrong direction, further fracturing the neighborhood's built environment.

The Alliance joins many community leaders, signed below, in the West End and Beacon Hill neighborhoods in a call for further evaluation of additional alternatives to demolition of the historic buildings on the site. West Enders are adamant for a solution that finds some way to keep these last few vestiges of their neighborhood and its history and allows these powerful artifacts to reengage with the life of their community.

We recognize and appreciate the fact that MGH has considered several preservation options. However, some new ideas have come to light that deserve sincere consideration. For example, we urge MGH and the City to explore relocating the West End House, both the building and its vital historic community use, to the lot behind the development site at the corner of Parkman and Blossom streets, where a loading dock is currently located. This would be a short distance to move the building and would not disturb the sequencing of underground parking construction- two reasons MGH has given for not saving any of the historic buildings. The community has clearly and repeatedly expressed the need for community space, during this review process and those of other projects in the neighborhood, and utilizing the West End House for its original purpose would be a good-faith gesture to the community that MGH is responsive to local needs.

We also urge MGH to explore retaining the entirety of the tenement building on N. Anderson Street in its current location within the proposed arcade. Though the arcade will need to be adjusted to accommodate the building, it could create an interesting focal point for the space, a destination for the general public on the campus, and an opportunity to tell the stories of the people of the West End in an authentic space. We recognize that other adjustments would be required, and there may be some minor loss of parking below, but this is a path that should be explored.

While we understand that MGH is anxious to move forward with this project, we feel that the right solution for MGH and the community is not yet at hand. Both MGH and the City are capable of collaboration, creative thinking, and complicated problem solving far exceeding what has occurred so far with this project. As long as potential solutions to save one or more of these important buildings remain on the table, the Alliance and the organizations signed below are not yet prepared to finalize financial and other forms of mitigation. We cannot emphasize enough the fact that these buildings hold deep meaning and value for the residents of the West End. They embody important lessons for Boston and other cities about the deplorable impacts of the ongoing practices of Urban Renewal, gentrification, and discriminatory demolition, zoning, and housing. The history of these specific buildings is central to the legacy of the neighborhood, standing as critical rare survivors.

Throughout the conversations and public meetings held regarding this project as well as the Hurley Building at the Government Services Center, the West End Library, the Esplanade, and other locations in the neighborhood, it has become abundantly clear that the West End is in need of critical social services and spaces. Residents are demanding community space, a school, a senior center, service space for unhoused members of the community, and other facilities that exist in other neighborhoods. So much has already been taken from this neighborhood. It is time for us to work together to give back, repair damage, and support a thriving community that has been fractured by decades of insensitive development; a community that cannot be re-built by a hospital mega-block that does not make every single effort to preserve and honor key elements of its history while simultaneously rebuilding and filling the community service voids that remain. If that can be done within these historic places all the better.

We welcome and look forward to further dialogue with MGH, the BPDA and City leadership, and the West End and Beacon Hill communities.

Thank you,



Greg Galer
Executive Director

Co-signed:

Beacon Hill Civic Association
Friends of the West End Library
Historic New England
Martha McNamara, Beacon Hill Resident/Wellesley College Professor
Old West Church
West End Civic Association

CC:

Representative Jay Livingstone, 8th Suffolk, Massachusetts State House
Mayor Martin Walsh, City of Boston
Kim Janey, Boston City Council
Lydia Edwards, Boston City Council
Kenzie Bok, Boston City Council
Annissa Essaibi George, Boston City Council
Michael Flaherty, Boston City Council
Julia Mejia, Boston City Council
Michelle Wu, Boston City Council
Brian Golden, Boston Planning and Development Agency
Jonathan Greeley, Boston Planning and Development Agency
Edward Carmody, Boston Planning and Development Agency
Elizabeth Stifel, Boston Civic Design Commission
Andrea Leers, Boston Civic Design Commission
David Hanitchak, Massachusetts General Hospital
Doug Kelleher, Epsilon Associates
Geoffrey Melhuish, Epsilon Associates
Tom Sieniewicz, NBBJ
Brona Simon, Massachusetts Historical Commission
Rosanne Foley, Boston Landmarks Commission
Lynn Smiledge, Boston Landmarks Commission