

BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

Greg Galer, Executive Director of the Boston Preservation Alliance Testimony for Boston City Council
Ways & Means Committee on Boston Landmarks Commission Budget

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Thank you, Madam Chair. I'm Greg Galer, the Executive Director of the Boston Preservation Alliance. I want to thank Chief White Hammond for touching on many of our concerns and we're excited to work with her. And thank Councilors for their support and recognition that historic resources are a critical asset of the city.

I'll be more blunt than others this morning. How we treat our cultural heritage is in crisis. We are failing to balance growth and change with how we protect the places that represent our collective past.

The under-resourced Landmarks Commission struggles each day – to fulfill its regulatory responsibilities to review demolitions, to attend to demands for new landmarks, and to provide prompt service to properly guide growth, balanced with preservation. The guardrails in our system are failing. The BLC struggles to reply to residents begging for help as they see their neighborhoods whittled away.

The BLC is: Unable to be proactive; Unable to be equitable; Unable to properly guide our city with efficient, fair, and up-to-date regulations and procedures. Unable to focus on fixing the process. Without investment in the Landmarks Commission the City of Boston Simply CANNOT: meet our goals for equity and inclusion; meet our environmental Goals without proactively addressing over 70% of the city built before WWII; respond to residents demanding the distinctiveness of their neighborhoods not be erased or effectively guide property owners and developers

While I thank the Mayor for offering modest increases to the Landmarks Commission Budget, including funding for an additional staff member, these increases do not halt the backward momentum.

I have some proposed solutions. I urge the city to provide financial support for 3 items:

1 - A permanent additional BLC Staff person as a Community Liaison

To focus directly in the neighborhoods, helping to address the serious equity imbalance we have.

(For example Mattapan has only one Landmark and Hyde Park has none)

New staff can provide guidance and collaboration with residents in communities. Shift to a more proactive approach rather than the too-late reactive mode that causes the consternation you all hear from your constituents. We need this as a minimum for staff increases.

2 – Funding to tackle the long-standing backlog of nearly 90 pending Landmark Petitions. This ambiguity leaves buildings vulnerable. It pollutes the whole Landmarking process with uncertainty. Additionally, it is completely inequitable, with groups able to privately raise funds to complete needed studies ahead of

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others. This backlog is like a chain around BLC's neck, leaving them unable to complete the process of newly accepted landmark petitions in a timely manner. The delay, caused by insufficient staffing and backlog, is why we've recently lost buildings in Roxbury and East Boston.

We estimate that \$200,000 could tackle this problem either by outside contract or with a temporary, three-3 year staff position. This should Not require outside fundraising. This is a central function of the city and should be in this budget

3 – A multi-year comprehensive survey of historic resources throughout the city. This long-overdue investment will benefit all constituents. It will reduce uncertainty, allow for planning and forward thinking, and provide a tool for the city to better control the fate of its existing buildings. It will provide an understanding of the historic resources we have, their value to residents, and how we can best evolve and grow without destroying heritage important to all. It will discover stories and places of importance to our BIPOC and immigrant communities who are woefully underrepresented in both our historical narrative and in the places we protect for future generations.

A survey also helps guide development by providing information about the significance of properties, reducing the surprises encountered today which leads to frustration all around. A survey will allow the city to better direct desired growth to where it will be more universally welcomed – better balancing the growth and preservation we all desire.

We estimate this is a \$3million multi-year initiative.

Note that the two latter items pair well with the one-time, 3-year window of federal stimulus funds when they become available. I urge you to remember that the historic resources that we enjoy and learn from today ... and the new ones that we uncover as we broaden our stories ... don't survive by accident. They require investment.

THANK YOU