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Oct. 18, 2022

New Orleans City Council
1300 Perdido Street
New Orleans, LA 70122

Re: HDLC appeal of 502 Frenchman is without merit

Plans to demolish the entirety of the roof on the structure at 502-4 Frenchman/1407 Decatur in order to replace it with added hotel rooms and a deck were presented to the Architectural Review Committee of the New Orleans Historic District Landmarks Commission on four occasions. While the design improved with each iteration, it nevertheless met with disapproval every time. Twice more the applicant appeared before the full commission and was also denied.

What did these architects and community servants find so objectionable about the rooftop addition? True: it requires complete demolition of the historic roof framing, and will be quite visible from multiple locations. However, what they cited in each of their unanimous decisions was something simpler: a strict prohibition on rooftop additions to Significant-rated structures in the City Council-approved HDLC Design Guidelines (section 12, page 13).

These individuals, who volunteer their time and expertise to preserve the landmarks and neighborhoods that make New Orleans a world-class destination, were simply following the rules given them by the Council. It is not too much to ask that the property owner follow these rules as well.

If the Council now feels that the guidelines are too restrictive, it can initiate a process to review and revise them, with opportunities for input from the public and practitioners. To grant a single property owner an ad hoc exemption from a clearly stated prohibition undermines public confidence in our local preservation laws. It only lends credence to cynics who say there are two sets of rules in this town: one for people with pockets deep enough to hire paid consultants and outside counsel, and one for the rest of us.

It is every applicant's right to appeal, and we value that just as we value the tradition of deference to District councilmembers in these matters. We only call this appeal to the attention of the full Council because the case is so clearly without merit. To grant this appeal would set a negative precedent with unclear repercussions.

(cont.)

Reasonable people can disagree about the aesthetics of an existing or proposed building. That's not what's happening in this instance. Nor is the applicant contesting the determination that this building merits a Significant rating. The structure is almost 200 years old, and was built for a free man of color who was a successful entrepreneur. It is one of the finest examples of Creole-Greek Revival townhouses in the Faubourg Marigny and is seen by millions of tourists and locals every year.

Please help preserve this one-of-a-kind historic site by voting to uphold the HDLC's fair, reasonable and prudent decision.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nathan Lott". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Nathan" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Lott".

Nathan Lott
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P.S. - You may hear from proponents that this project has received approval from the SHPO (State Historic Preservation Office) for purposes of tax incentives. However, this is a ruse. The matter at hand concerns the city's independent regulatory authority in land use matters, specifically the protection of historic resources for the benefit of its residents. It is prudent for the city to avoid conflict between local standards and those of our state and federal partners, but the city is in no way bound. New Orleans may opt to be less or more restrictive. Moreover, as of the last HDLC meeting, the National Park Service has not approved these plans for federal Historic Tax Credits. It most likely will not, because of an interpretation to the Secretary of Interior Standards for Rehabilitation that states, "Rooftop additions are almost never appropriate for buildings that are less than four stories high" (ITS Bulletin Number 36, page 1). It is well known among practitioners that the NPS typically requires more strict adherence to such guidelines than state agencies.