

My name is Peter McNiece and I live in the University Heights Historic District at 520 SW 10th Street. This is directly across the street from the two parcels the petitioner is proposing to develop to construct the Alpha Phi Sorority Chapter House. I raised several concerns regarding this development at the April 6th Historic Preservation Board meeting and wanted to share a few thoughts with you in advance of the May 4th meeting so that you may consider these issues in advance.

I extended the same courtesy to Ms. Kary Huffman from Alpha Phi. A copy of my April 13th email to her is attached.

You may recall that I am a builder, professional engineer, and real estate broker who has spent 13 years managing infill development projects within the University Heights Historic District. I've renovated a dozen contributing structures and eventually bought a 100-year-old chert & brick house which my wife and I fully restored and now call home. Our "Dream House" is beautiful, but we live with noisy, drafty, energy inefficient windows because the 2017 Historic Preservation Board was so committed to maintaining the historic character of the community that they denied my request to have them replaced. In hindsight, these windows add a unique historic charm so I'm glad we kept them. What is difficult to understand, however, is why the priorities of this Board seem to have shifted away from such a resolute commitment to historic preservation.

I believe the petitioner's Certificate of Appropriateness to demolish a contributing structure, relocate two historic homes without consideration for the damage doing so would cause them, and construction of an architecturally incompatible building ten times larger than anything else on the property and made of materials not typical in the neighborhood would have been quickly approved at your last meeting if I had not asked the Board to consider a different perspective on the development. I absolutely want Alpha Phi to build their Sorority Chapter House across the street but ask that you help them to do so in a historically appropriate manner.

Issue #1:

Please require the petitioner to restore the relocated contributing structures.

I was personally responsible for relocating three contributing structures within University Heights and have first-hand knowledge of how destructive the moving process is to the buildings. The homes end up with extensive damage to the plaster walls and ceilings, buckling of floors, structural separation of the chimneys, and broken/racked windows. We had to renovate all three buildings before they were once again suitable for occupancy. Unless there is a requirement to renovate these two structures, moving them will only serve to accelerate their deterioration and eventual loss from our historic inventory. Allowing this to move forward without requiring their renovation contradicts the very purpose of a Historic Preservation Board.

Issue #2:

Please reject the petitioners request to demolish one of the few remaining contributing structures in the University Heights Historic District.

While I am an advocate for property owner's rights, the petitioner acquired these two parcels with full knowledge of the fact that they were within a historic district and that the contributing structures on the property were protected by the City of Gainesville from demolition due to their intrinsic historic value. The brick garage's status as "contributing" makes its demolition anathema to the objectives of the Historic Preservation Board. As I mentioned at last month's meeting, it is a 100-year-old, 2-car garage in good condition that the petitioner wants to demolish to make room for a couple of parking spaces. The fact that its existence is inconvenient to their proposed site plan should not be sufficient justification to allow its destruction. The petitioner will absolutely incorporate this contributing structure into their development plan if they are not allowed to destroy it. The loss of any contributing structure irreversibly diminishes the historic character of the community and to lose one for such a senseless purpose is particularly heartbreaking.

Issue #3:

Please require the petitioner to modify the proposed building components. Chert and brick are the dominant building materials adjacent to the proposed Sorority House, not stucco. Greek Columns are architecturally uncharacteristic in the University Heights Historic District.

As currently designed, the Sorority Chapter House looks more like an 1840's plantation home than a compatible structure in a historic community. The petitioner is incorporating the Historic Preservation Boards' objections from the April meeting regarding the use of so many dissimilar cladding materials. They should also be required to utilize far more than just a token amount of chert stone and brick and the columns should be re-designed to make them more architecturally appropriate.

Issue #3:

Please consider having the Tudor home setback 27' to match the Sorority Chapter House.

Having the Tudor home match the building setback of the Sorority Chapter House will maintain the building frontage line and help reduce massing along SW 10th Street. Since the development plan calls for the removal of every tree on the two parcels, there should be little to prevent the Tudor home from sliding back a few feet.

Note that the petitioner has already submitted this project to the City of Gainesville's Department of Sustainable Development for permitting and have done so without obtaining approval of their Certificate of Appropriateness and before they have heard or incorporated any comments made by the Historic Preservation Board. I cannot speculate on their intentions, but to proceed without the consent

of the members of this body reduces the Board's ability to have an influence on the building elements and diminishes your authority to have a say on the appropriateness of the proposed relocations and demolition of historic structures.

I am immensely proud of my role in all the work that has been done over the years restoring so many of the contributing structures within the University Heights Historic District. It is the reason my family relocated here and now calls this community home. What I would like the Board Members to understand, however, is that homeowners like me cannot do this on our own. We need people like you - Gainesville's advocates for historic preservation -- to speak up at Historic Preservation Board meetings in defense of these contributing structures and to protect all of Gainesville's historic districts from incompatible development. Without your authority and expertise, the University Heights Historic District has no chance against well-organized and well-funded developers that don't always share your interest in historic preservation.

In closing, I have no doubt that Alpha Phi will make an excellent neighbor and that with only a few modifications, can make their Sorority Chapter House far more compatible with the University Heights Historic District and be a welcome addition to the community.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration,

Peter McNiece



Peter McNiece <pmcniece@gmail.com>

Alpha Phi Sorority House at the University of Florida

1 message

pmcniece <pmcniece@gmail.com>
To: khuffman@alphaphi.org

Tue, Apr 13, 2021 at 9:46 PM

Ms. Kary Huffman,

My name is Pete McNiece and I live at 520 SW 10th St which is across the street from the parcels you're proposing to develop to construct the Alpha Phi Chapter House.

I'm writing to share my sincere belief that a sorority house whose architecture and development plan is compatible with this historic district would make an excellent neighbor and one that I would welcome in this community. My wife and I are both products of the Collegiate Greek system and have very fond memories of our experiences and the lifelong friendships we made during those years. I am pro (thoughtful) development and very much in favor of building an Alpha Phi Chapter House at the University of Florida. I would like nothing more than to speak in support of your project at the next Historic Preservation Board meeting.

While there were a number of issues I presented at the April 6th meeting, there are really only a handful that prevent me from supporting this project.

With regards to the architecture of the building, I think that incorporating more chert stone and reducing the amount of stucco would make the building far more compatible with the adjoining buildings. In addition, the Greek columns are incongruous and should be reconsidered. My fraternity was a brownstone in Boston's Historic Back Bay, so we celebrated our Greek heritage in other ways. Perhaps you would consider chert columns with brick quoining instead? This is not only more consistent with the neighboring architecture but also an opportunity to make the Alpha Phi house stand out amongst a sea of sororities that look like 1840's southern plantation homes. The character of your Chapter House as a historic structure would appeal to incoming freshmen, assist in your diversity recruitment efforts, and further distinguish Alpha Phi during Rush.

I think it's disingenuous to say that the sorority has to be setback 27' from the property line to "save existing trees". There are few foundations at the front of the building and it appears that every single tree on the property will be cut down to make way for this project. The only remaining trees belong to the City of Gainesville as they are in the Right-of-Way. Instead of me arguing this point with the Historic Preservation Board, would you consider placing the relocated Tudor house at a 27' setback to match the sorority? This will maintain a uniform building line and further diminish the architectural massing along SW 10th St.

I also believe that saving the historic garage structure should be a high priority. Developers are not required to provide any parking in this area and the ability to offer two covered spaces inside a historic garage would make those spots very desirable.

Trimark Properties has been considering the construction of a public parking garage less than two blocks from this location for years. They've been waiting for sufficient density to justify the expense and Alpha Phi bringing 50 cars to the community may be the tipping point they've been waiting for. In addition, the City of Gainesville has recently created numerous new vehicle spaces along SW 6th St and dozens of scooter spaces along SW 5th Ave that are surprisingly underutilized. I mention all of this to assuage your concerns about losing the one or two parking spaces along the rear of the development that could be a consequence of saving the historic garage. Most sorority members with vehicles use them sparingly and keep them parked for long periods of time. Having to walk an extra couple of blocks when they need it isn't usually much of a concern.

On a final note, I recommend that your Certificate of Appropriateness address the renovation of the relocated structures after their move. I have moved three contributing structures within University Heights and can assure you that the process is very destructive. The homes end up with extensive damage to the plaster walls and ceilings, buckling of floors, structural separation of the chimneys, and broken/racked windows. We had to perform a complete renovation of each of the three buildings before they were suitable for occupancy. Without assurances that a similar restoration effort will occur at these two structures, moving them will only serve to accelerate their deterioration and will be something I suspect Historic Preservation Board members will find objectionable.

While unrelated to the upcoming meeting, other community members have expressed their concerns to me about the ability of trash trucks to navigate the rear alley (it currently seems impossible based on the location of utility poles and parking spaces) and the liability the City of Gainesville will assume by knowingly approving a project that will require food service delivery trucks to routinely block traffic on either SW 10th St or SW 5th Ave. I wanted you to be aware of these issues as they will surely come up during the planning review process.

I genuinely hope that me raising these concerns will contribute to a better overall project. One that is more compatible with the University Heights Historic District while also serving as a beautiful Chapter House for the Alpha Phi sorority at the University of Florida. Help me become a champion for this development instead of forcing me to advocate against it at the next Historic Preservation Board Meeting.

I did not send a similar email to CHW or your architect, but you are welcome to share this one if you like.

Sincerely,

Pete McNiece