

June 8, 2015

Dear Mayor and Members of the Evanston City Council,

After careful consideration, I have reached the conclusion that the most viable option for the Harley Clarke Mansion is for the City to sell the building and land and allow it to be renovated at the owner's expense for a publicly accessible commercial use, such as a boutique hotel, event space, and restaurant.

During the last 4 months I have witnessed firsthand how genuinely passionate people are about Evanston, the lakefront, our history, our values, and our future. I have also seen how receptive people are to having their voices heard and to being able to share their opinions and perspectives.

In the end it has become clear to me that the fate of the Mansion depends on what value or set of values one holds most important. Is it maintaining the mansion in the public trust in perpetuity? Is it preserving an old but once beautiful building? Is it creating more green space? Is it generating ongoing revenue? Is it creating jobs? These and other value-based questions must be answered in the context of the Mansion and the City at-large.

The Key Question: Funding the Renovation / Re-Purposing of the Building

Assuming the building is to be saved and not demolished, the question arises where the financial resources should come from to renovate this structure to meet an acceptable, publicly accessible function. The City? The Private Sector? Generous donors? A foundation? A new community-based organization? Equally important, does the money even exist from any of these sectors/entities to create a function of public value?

General Funding Suggestions

Those advocating for the City to retain and renovate the Mansion for public use (Option 1) believe one or more of the following statements. (1) The building can be repaired/renovated for significantly less than the figures cited in the IDNR and Pritzker proposals. (2) Revenue exists within the City's budget to renovate and maintain the building. (3) The City can find another tenant who would renovate the property and pay a market rate for its use. (4) The City can raise funds from donors for the repairs/renovation. (5) The City can raise taxes or issue a bond to generate the revenue necessary to keep this a public asset. (6) Residents can volunteer their time and talent free of charge or at significantly discounted rates to repair/renovate the mansion. (7) The renovation of the mansion can occur in phases over many years, and use apprentices from ETHS and elsewhere.

Generally, advocates for Option 1 believe that if it's not financially feasible for the City to repair/renovate under Option 1, then the City should gift (but maintain ownership through a long-term lease) the building to a non-profit or foundation, such as a community group like the Harley Clarke Revitalization Project (HCRP). If the City Council selected this Option (#5), the HCRP believes it could raise at least \$3M to repair, renovate, and repurpose the building to serve as a community cultural center, and that the building could then be self-sufficient through user and other fees.

For advocates of Options 1 and 5, the value that is most important to them is that the Harley Clarke Mansion remains forever in the public domain. In fact, many of the advocates of Option 1 and 5 would rather the building be demolished and converted into parkland than sold and converted into a publicly accessible function such as a hotel, event space, and/or restaurant. On an emotional level I think it's an appealing idea that the building

remain publicly owned and operated. However, I cannot reconcile that with the financial burden this will place on taxpayers, particularly in light of other more pressing City needs, and why we should expect a different outcome from what's occurred over the last 40 years relative to the maintenance and upkeep of the building.

My Position

At some point during the debate over Harley Clarke – perhaps when the yard signs went up that said, “Parks are for People, Not for Profit” – a pervasive, yet I believe false, premise solidified in the minds of many: private development and public good cannot co-exist. As one of the participants in this process noted, “Private development and public good are not binary choices. Open minds can find reasonable compromise.” For this reason I believe the City selling the mansion and land and allowing it to be renovated for a commercial use, such as a hotel, restaurant, and event space, is just such a compromise between private enterprise and public benefits. (Note, any such sale must exclude the beach, dunes, and access to the beach; restore the Mansion and Jen Jensen gardens; contain covenants to ensure that the use of the property must be maintained even upon subsequent sale of the property; retain or expand parking for beachgoers; and limit noise and congestion for nearby neighbors. Additionally, the City Council ought to investigate a land-lease. However, a land-lease should not be non-negotiable condition.)

Assuming a reputable acquirer were to step forward, I support Option 3 because it restores the building at the expense of the owner (and not the City); the quality of restoration will likely exceed that which can be done by the City or community-based non-profit; the building's function would be publicly accessible, meaning it would be available to the public to dine, lodge, or hold an event; and it would eliminate the City's financial and legal risk associated with owning this asset. Furthermore, this solution would generate one-time revenue, plus property, sales, hotel, and liquor taxes, valuable revenue streams that could be directed to other more pressing needs in town related to education, social services, affordable housing, parks and recreation, etc. This solution is also aligned with the City's Strategic Plan agreed upon by the City Council and would create good jobs. Lastly, this solution would create a one-of-a-kind amenity on the lake, something that doesn't exist anywhere in Evanston or up the shore.

I also favor this option because the Mansion and grounds remain publicly accessible (something that would not likely occur under Option 4), and does not siphon community fundraising efforts from other worthy causes. While gifting the building to an established foundation with a track record of preservation, such as the Chicago Botanic Gardens or Driehaus, is appealing from a preservation perspective, it's unclear how likely this is given that neither entity nor similar ones responded to the City's Request for Information (RFI) in 2012.

In closing, as a participant in this process said, “We need to live in the world as it is, not as we would like it to be.” This does not mean that we shouldn't be idealistic and aspire for better, but it does mean that we can't roll back the passage of time and unburden ourselves of all the other problems, budget constraints, and prior commitments that need to be addressed in our community. Selling the mansion for a publicly accessible use, such as a boutique hotel, event space, and restaurant/café, generates many public benefits with modest sacrifice. To me, this solution seems like the realistic, sensible middle ground in this debate.

Sincerely,

Stephen H. Hagerty
Chair, Harley Clarke Citizens' Advisory Committee