

Preservationists see houses on N Street as 'endangered'

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On the heels of a D.C. Superior Court order that reversed the vacant-property classification of six houses in the 1700 block of N Street, the D.C. Preservation League has announced plans to include the sites on its 2007 list of the city's most endangered places;

"They are a contributing element to the Dupont Circle Historic District," said Rick Busch, president of the Dupont Circle Conservancy, the preservation group that nominated the houses for the list. "The buildings seem to just sit there ... and we're concerned."

"I don't know anything about that," owner Morton Bender said of the preservation league's announcement. Since purchasing the properties in 1988, Bender has

presented multiple versions of plans to convert the houses into a boutique hotel before the Board of Zoning Adjustment and the Historic Preservation Review Board. The city has continually rejected such plans — rife with requests for zoning exceptions — over the years.

"His proposals have been massive for that site," said Michael Beidler, a former president of the Dupont Circle Conservancy.

When asked about his current plans for the properties, 1743 to 1755 N St., Bender said, "I haven't thought about it."

Though the city once classified Bender's N Street houses as vacant properties — and therefore subject to higher tax rates — Bender, a developer, appealed the decision to the D.C. Superior Court. This March, the court

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ordered reclassification of the houses as residential and commercial properties, and a refund to Bender of more than \$600,000 worth of previously paid taxes.

According to Dale Cooter, the attorney representing Bender, the properties are exempt from the vacant-property tax laws due to the pending status of their applications before the zoning and historic review boards at the time of taxation, in addition to a too-late filing for the vacant-property tax in 2004. The six houses are grouped onto three lots for tax purposes.

"The purpose of the [higher rate] is to encourage people to develop their properties," said Cooter, who noted that in Bender's case, zoning and historic regulations have repeatedly impeded such progress.

But Beidler called Bender's legal proceedings "absurd and abusive."

"You'd have to be a blind idiot to think those buildings aren't vacant," he said.

Neighbors, including Jeremiah Cohen, owner of the adjacent Tabard Inn, have accused Bender of demolition by neglect for what they see as a refusal to take care of the buildings and to offer a workable plan for their redevelopment. Problems associated with the properties over the years have included litter, graffiti and drug deals, according to Cohen, who

said the buildings have created a blight on the neighborhood, particularly at night.

While superficially presentable, the buildings warrant a closer look, said Cohen, noting that a tree is growing out of a chimney of one of the buildings and that some contain rotting wooden beams.

The houses' front storm drains are also insufficient and frequently clogged, threatening the foundations of not only Bender's buildings but also the Tabard Inn, said Cohen.

"It's sad, because this is one of the nicest historic blocks in the city," Cohen said.

The street, now occupied by professional offices, trade associations and inns, is still lined with late-19th-century and early-20th-century structures that housed Theodore Roosevelt and Franklin Roosevelt as well as other prominent citizens of the time.

Among the block's historic buildings is the former Gralyn Hotel at 1745 N St., one of Bender's properties. The hotel once shared a garden with the Tabard Inn, said Cohen, and hosted Julia Child and prominent journalists David Halberstam and Robert Scheer as guests.

Lawrence Halperin, the urban landscape architect who designed the Franklin D. Roosevelt Memorial, frequently visited the hotel over his 15 years of working on the memorial. In a 2000 letter, he wrote that the site's disintegra-



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A Superior Court judge overturned the District's finding that the houses are properly taxed as vacant property.

tion would be a "terrible loss" for the city.

"Washington D.C. should actively preserve these wonderful references to the past," Halperin wrote. "They provide the secret treasures and joyful surprises that give the city its character."

The D.C. Preservation League has advertised the Gralyn Hotel as the site for next Thursday's formal announcement of the most-endangered-places list.

The event will take place in front of the "boarded-up" building, according to Rebecca Miller, the organization's executive director, who said, "It's a public space. We don't need permission."

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