

May 7, 2017

Matthew Weintraub
Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board

Re: Claremont Hotel property, 41 Tunnel Road

Mr. Weintraub, please share this letter with the full membership of the Advisory Board and other officials as appropriate.

I am writing to express my strong conviction that the Claremont Hotel property must retain its full existing status and boundaries as a site of historic and cultural importance. This property is an important cultural resource for both Oakland and Berkeley, and for those of us lucky enough to live in the vicinity, its magnificence adds an unquantifiable benefit to our community and daily lives.

Given the substantial length of the Historic Resource Evaluation (HRE) Draft and the brief period available for review, I apologize for probably failing to adhere to the regulatory protocol appropriate for public comment — instead I will speak from the practical and heart-felt standpoint of an area resident concerned about my neighborhood, my city, and the quality of my environment.

As I review the HRE and the development plans for the property, I cannot help but feel absolutely convinced that what is proposed will totally destroy this precious cultural resource. The primary argument I read in the HRE is that a significant portion of the current resource boundary “lacks integrity to be a contributing resource” and should be excised from the landmark designation, thereby making this acreage available for development.

This is misguided. If this attitude prevailed, many historic sites around the world and locally, including UNESCO World Heritage sites would not exist as they do today because they would have been excluded of consideration due to prior degradation and abuse. For example, I recently visited the Alhambra in Grenada, Spain — a unique historical site that was overrun by squatters and substantially degraded for many years but which has subsequently been *renovated and restored* for future generations. This is a forward-looking approach to managing our cultural heritage resources.

Closer to home, renovations and restorations of buildings like the Paramount Theater have helped Oakland to retain historic properties that can then contribute to a robust community with its history preserved. A relatively small investment could restore the gardens and landscaping at the Claremont that the HRE correctly identifies as having fallen by the wayside. But the proposal to remove these lands from the Landmark boundary will allow them to be developed and, thus, lost forever.

At a personal level, I regularly walk, bike, and drive by the Claremont property from all sides. Yesterday I drove up Ashby Avenue/Tunnel Road, looking up at the hotel from the near the parking kiosk. Sure, there is a parking lot and road - but raise your eyes and you see the iconic structure of the hotel itself, and can easily imagine it in its full glory in your mind's eye. As this vantage point looks directly at the area at issue in the HRE, I tried to imagine that view with the proposed monolithic blockhouse in place — it would be a totally degraded vista with little or no historical appeal. I then imagined how it would look given a modest investment in landscaping and renovation — how beautiful that could be and how it could preserve the site's grandeur. I do, of course, realize that no such renovation proposal is

currently on the table; however, endorsing the reduced boundaries proposed by HRE would be the kiss of death to any future restoration.

Finally, I cannot close this letter without drawing attention to public comment cycle for this report and review. A long weekend available to learn about, find, review, and comment on a 200 page document is clearly unreasonable. While I do not know the regulatory requirements surrounding this type of public comment period (and I must assume that what has been done is technically legitimate), such a limited time period certainly violates any true spirit of garnering substantive citizen input. I do hope the Advisory Board will therefore give added weight to the few comments that are likely to be submitted. I regret that I am unable to attend the May 8 meeting in person.

In closing, I draw your attention to the following citation of the Narrative Statement of the National Register of Historical Places, Section 8 page 33, which I think captures some of the essence of this landmark.

I do hope that you will vote to preserve this iconic property in its entirety.

The hotel has always been, and today remains, the visual linchpin for a whole large section of Oakland and Berkeley. It is both difficult and painful to imagine this community *without* the Claremont's magnificent and pervasive presence. On an October day of 1991 many Oaklanders and Berkeleyans gazed with particular apprehension as that day's huge firestorm swept over the hillsides toward the well-loved hotel. Fortunately, public officials ordered a special effort to save the Claremont.

On an even larger scale, the great hotel has been and is an important feature of the *regional* cityscape. For many decades, for countless residents and travelers alike, the Claremont has been a splendid highlight, and prime locational guide: a quintessential example of the class of townscape elements that Kevin Lynch, in his seminal book *The Image of the City*, called "landmarks."

Regards,

Roger Abraham