



Preserving Rockville's Heritage

Mayor and Council
111 Maryland Avenue
Rockville, MD 20850

April 20, 2016

Dear Mayor and Council,

Chestnut Lodge is of great historical significance to the City of Rockville as the former site of the 19th-century luxury Woodlawn hotel and a 20th-century world-renowned psychiatric facility. As a City supported nonprofit with a mission to preserve and protect the history and heritage of Rockville and owners of Frieda's Cottage at 19 Thomas Street, Peerless Rockville calls for careful examination of the proposal to amend PRU 2005-00022. The PRU (2006) and Chestnut Lodge Design Guidelines (2004) were crafted with the intent of preserving this historic landscape. However, both of these documents are silent on what to do in the event of a catastrophic loss of the Lodge. Peerless Rockville encourages Mayor and Council to deny this amendment with the understanding that the absence of clear guidelines gives the City of Rockville the opportunity to step back and consider the best possible outcome for this unique, small but highly visible parcel.

While the PRU allowed for the creation of seven condominium units on this parcel, this allowance was predicated on the rehabilitation and adaptive re-use of the historic lodge itself, which sadly, consumption by fire has rendered impossible. Conformance with the original PRU resolution and carefully crafted and adopted Chestnut Lodge Design Guidelines should guide development of the historic site. We question if the proposal by JNP Chestnut Lodge, LLC for the construction of seven townhouse units at 500 West Montgomery Avenue, is in keeping with the original spirit and intent of the PRU and takes into account the best historic preservation practices for the significant history of the site and its associated land use. New construction and the introduction of seven townhouse units threatens to diminish the historical integrity of the entire Chestnut Lodge campus, including its:

- place within the West Montgomery Historic District
- historical associations with a bygone time
- institutional land use designation
- orientation to and treed viewshed from West Montgomery Avenue
- prominent siting on what was and continues to be a primary thoroughfare, into and out of, the City center
- overall significance as a landmark historic landscape in Rockville

Site Significance

In 1890, when Rockville was an up and coming haven for urban residents looking to escape the City, and the B&O Railroad was attracting speculative developers to purchase land for elaborate Victorian home sites, visitors stayed at the grand Woodlawn Hotel. The Second Empire brick structure fronted West Montgomery Avenue, a main thoroughfare, its prominence punctuated by a deep setback and expansive parklike lawn. Although economic depression caused its life as a hotel to be short-lived, the parcel's next owner Dr. Ernest Bullard appreciated the value and beauty of the site when he chose Woodlawn Hotel as the ideal location for his private mental health sanitarium. As both a hotel and as a sanitarium/hospital Chestnut Lodge has functioned as a unified campus, housing guests, patients, medical professionals and other caregivers for over 100 years.

Throughout its long life, the architecturally dominant hotel stood as an iconic feature on the West Montgomery Avenue landscape. The property expanded into a modern medical campus, locally, regionally and nationally sanctioned as a leading medical institution, for the care and treatment of psychiatric disorders, but always retained the prominent hotel as its visual anchor. The striking rooflines and vertical tower features, along with other significant period details endeared it to residents as a unique landmark property, dually cited as significant in the City of Rockville both architecturally, as the last remaining hotel site from Rockville's resort era, and for its historical associations with advancements in the field of psychoanalysis.

The history of this site is intertwined inexorably with Rockville's history and the development of the City over the past century. Its origin as Woodlawn Hotel coincides with Rockville's late 19th century identity as a countryside vacation getaway for Washingtonians. The name Chestnut Lodge and the transformation into a sanitarium occurred at a time when health and wellness were associated with spas and relaxation as much as medicine and science. Chestnut Lodge was established in Rockville in part due to its proximity to the Capital, to provide mental healthcare to a population whose links to the federal workforce provided both economic and education levels more able and willing to undergo psychiatric care if needed. As Rockville transitioned into a large, modern city, the medicine practiced at Chestnut Lodge also evolved and influenced national and international understanding of psychiatric care.

Historic Preservation Treatments

The importance of the 20-plus-acre site as an institutional campus and a prominent historical landscape has been repeatedly affirmed in Rockville City planning documents to include the 2002 Land Use Plan, the 2002 Master Plan, the 2004 Chestnut Lodge Design Guidelines and the 2006 PRU. Its historical and associative value has also been recognized by Montgomery County, the Maryland Historical Trust and the National Register as a contributing resource in the West Montgomery Avenue Historic District, of which it is a significant part.

Application of the appropriate historic preservation treatment should guide development of this site. According to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties, there are four treatment approaches to a historic property or landscape listed in hierarchical order: preservation, rehabilitation, restoration, and reconstruction.

- Preservation is defined as the act or process of applying measures necessary to sustain the existing form, integrity, and materials of an historic property.
- Rehabilitation is defined as the act or process of making possible a compatible use for a property through repair, alterations, and additions while preserving those portions or features which convey its historical, cultural, or architectural values.
- Restoration is defined as the act or process of accurately depicting the form, features, and character of a property as it appeared at a particular period of time by means of the removal of features from other periods in its history and reconstruction of missing features from the restoration period.
- Reconstruction is defined as the act or process of depicting, by means of new construction, the form, features, and detailing of a non-surviving site, landscape, building, structure, or object for the purpose of replicating its appearance at a specific period of time and in its historic location.

The Secretary's Standards for Preservation call for maximizing the retention of distinctive features, spaces, and spatial relationships. Peerless Rockville asserts that despite the absence of the main lodge, the property survives as an important historical landscape, which includes a visual presence along West Montgomery Avenue, Frieda's Cottage, Rose Hill Barn, Little Lodge, and the Ice House, and retains significant circular access patterns. Therefore, the landscape has integrity and remains significant.

With the loss of the main lodge, preservation, rehabilitation, and restoration of the structure are no longer options. As discussed, much of the historic campus landscape is intact, and thus can and should be preserved, rehabilitated, or restored. Because reconstruction depicts vanished or non-surviving portions of a property, it should be given consideration as a valid treatment. Reconstruction may be possible, despite the absence of documentation of the lost structure in the form of HABS records or measured architectural drawings.

We note that reconstruction should be undertaken only after considerable study to determine if documentary and physical evidence is available to permit accurate reconstruction and such reconstruction is essential to the public understanding of the property. As indicated by the Secretary of the Interior, this choice must avoid conjecture of unknown pieces, identify the time period to which it will be reconstructed, and clearly identify the building as a recreation.

Adopted Chestnut Lodge Preservation Guidelines

Preservation of the historic Chestnut Lodge landscape was central to the 2004 Chestnut Lodge Design Guidelines, which are in place to guide the development of this site, as well as the 2006 PRU that the proposal before you seeks to amend. The guidelines directed preservation of the hotel building as the dominant architectural feature, around which the spatial relationships of other buildings, open areas, and roadways and pathways had been and should continue to be placed. It further describes these networks as integral to understanding the site's historical development.

In the spirit of preservation, the 2004 guidelines included goals to:

- Preserve and protect the existing character of the historic districts, including both the natural and built environments
- Provide guidance for rehabilitation and alteration, and discourage the introduction of incompatible features
- Protect the architectural heritage, established character, and value of the West Montgomery Avenue Historic District

We ask that the Mayor and Council consider if the current amendment meets the above stated goals in regards to the character, environmental setting, and compatibility with the architectural heritage of the West Montgomery Historic District.

New Construction

While the design guidelines allow for new construction, any new construction on this site must follow Maryland Land Use Article §8-304, which states that Historic District Commissions may strictly judge new construction if it would seriously impair the historic or architectural significance of the surrounding site. This is indeed the case at Chestnut Lodge, where the space in question was the central location around which the surrounding campus evolved, both as a hotel and hospital, and was respected when Chestnut Lodge community was planned and developed in 2006.

Peerless calls attention to Section 6.4 A of the 2004 Guidelines, which discourages the construction of new buildings within the West Montgomery Avenue Historic District. However, section 6.4 C states that if construction does occur within the historic district, it must harmonize and be compatible with the character of the existing historic district and the character of existing structures in terms of massing, size, scale, materials and architectural design, while maintaining an appropriate environmental setting.

To maintain the character of the historic landscape, it appears clear, that the City can choose to leave the site in an open parklike state or, alternately, allow construction of a singular, dominant building that serves as the primary focus of the site. Any new construction would be subject to strict limitations to be compatible to the earlier hotel in massing, size, scale, materials and design, maintain the public viewsheds from West Montgomery Avenue and Thomas Street, and preserve the existing open areas, roadways, and pathways in a way that is consistent with the sites historic development.

Although Rockville's Historic District Commission has provided feedback to the applicant on architectural features, they have not been asked for a recommendation on the overall appropriateness of the proposed townhomes at the site of Chestnut Lodge. Peerless Rockville believes that the HDC has a duty to address this question as their objective is to foster and safeguard the heritage of the community by preserving the historic districts therein. The HDC has been informed that portions of the Chestnut Lodge Design Guidelines no longer apply due to

the destruction of the main lodge; Peerless Rockville contends that all sections of this document remain applicable and in effect until changed by this body. The Chestnut Lodge Design Guidelines represent the City's deep concern for and commitment to the best preservation practices at this site, a mission which remains paramount even more so after the tragic loss of the lodge while under the management of the previous owner.

Project Plan Application

While the proposed design pays homage to the architectural features of the hotel, it fails to deliver a unified structure with four facades equally treated to respect the scale, massing and dominant character of the iconic main lodge. The proposed amendment to the PRU does not honor the intention and spirit of the original PRU as the introduction of individually accessed townhomes on the site is inconsistent with the historical development, character and architectural heritage of the West Montgomery Avenue Historic District. This is particularly evident on the west elevation where individual parking garages and decks introduce features that are not historically appropriate for the period of development. Additionally, at 32% larger, and 35 feet longer, the proposed construction stretches horizontally on the landscape and does not maintain the strong vertical mass of the earlier hotel.

Conclusion

Peerless Rockville encourages the Mayor and Council to carefully consider the significant history of the site, its prominent role in the development of this community and the full future ramifications of development on this small but significant parcel. With the dominant structure no longer standing, the community has an expectation that proposed new development will conform to the intention of the original guidelines and resolution, be respectful in preserving the significance of the site, and not introduce features that are incongruent with its historic use and associations. New construction on this parcel, particularly the introduction of townhouse units, will forever alter the historic Chestnut Lodge landscape as well as the protected views from West Montgomery Avenue and Thomas Street.

We call on Mayor and Council to preserve and add interpretation of the existing the landscape or to hold the developers to a high standard, befitting the unique status of this signature property, challenging them to design a structure of singular design, of a size and massing that embodies the spirit of the iconic hotel, the historic landscape, and respects the historic viewsheds to and from West Montgomery Avenue. Lastly, in addition to thoughtful development on the parcel, this site calls out to be properly interpreted to better educate and inform visitors to the story of its past. Peerless Rockville encourages you to require a full plan for interpretive elements and signage as a condition of any new construction on the site.

Sincerely,



Nancy Pickard

Executive Director