



November 22nd, 2011

Dear Mr. Ent,

The Board of Directors of the Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association wants to extend its heartfelt sympathy to those who lost their property, homes, businesses, and workplaces in the fire at the Sequoia Apartments on November 18, 2011.

We are writing to encourage you to consider a course of redevelopment of the interior of the building while retaining the unique exterior façade of this beautiful building.

In the coming days, as you weigh the challenging issues that face you regarding the property, we would like to provide here for your consideration several substantial benefits that may be gained by redeveloping the building within the existing exterior.

1. Accelerated Reconstruction – Less Constraints on Redevelopment Permitting

If you preserve the historic façade and develop a new interior within the existing building envelope a redevelopment project could enjoy a faster design review and approval process. Building within the existing façade is not likely to require a substantial EIR.

Furthermore, the permits to remodel and renovate an existing structure can be more easily and quickly obtained than the long approval process for a completely new project. This would put the property back in economic use faster to support the local economy.

The historic building could also be easily and speedily designated as a City of Berkeley Landmark, this would give your architects the benefit of access to the State Historic Building Code for their renovation planning, which would further ease constraints on the redevelopment process. BAHA would be happy to assist you in gaining landmark status for the building, which has already been listed as eligible for placement on the State Historic Register.

If the exterior is demolished, none of these options would be available for the property.

2. Significant Tax Reductions Through the Mills Act

By designating the building as a landmark, the project could also qualify for approximately 50-70% reduction in property taxes under the Mills Act, with the money saved applied towards maintenance of the historic property. Under the Mills Act some of the reconstruction costs may even be applied against future taxes. Meanwhile, a new building would bring with it increased tax assessment. The Mills Act is the single most important economic incentive program in California for the restoration of qualified historic buildings by private property owners. If you would like more information about the Mills Act, we would be happy to provide you with the contact information of experts in the field who could advise you on the acts use in cases such as this.

3. Preservation of a Beautiful Historic Resource for the Community

The Sequoia Apartments Building, built in 1916, has a unique exterior appearance and is one of the character-defining structures of Telegraph Avenue. Although we understand that damage from the fire may limit the ability to preserve the façade we believe that it is well worth exploring all possibilities to retain and celebrate this visual gem as this property moves forward into it's next phase of life. Although there are structural considerations involved with preserving a masonry facade, we are encouraged by many creative engineering solutions which are being employed across California to preserve similar masonry exterior, again we are happy to provide any assistance we can in exploring options for preservation.

We believe as owners you would have the wholehearted support, encouragement, and assistance of Berkeley's historic preservation community in this endeavor.

We understand the concern of some in the City and the business community about the possibility of lengthy delays and street blockages as the future of the building is in limbo. We appreciate that concern—BAHA is part of the Telegraph community, too, with our headquarters building just a few blocks from the Sequoia Apartments. But we believe that it should be possible to develop a solution to protect public safety—possibly by stabilizing the exterior to minimize collapse hazards, and closing those portions of the sidewalk immediately adjacent to the building—while allowing normal activities and traffic circulation to resume in the remainder of the business district; this would not be much different from the temporary disruptions that occur during major construction projects. Portions of streets in Downtown Berkeley, for example, have been closed for years for construction, without huge detrimental impacts. We encourage you to secure independent review by a structural engineer with expertise in historic masonry and timber buildings.

The situation right across the street from the Sequoia Building at the northeast corner of Telegraph and Haste offers a cautionary example of what can happen when a damaged historic building is quickly demolished. In the early 1990s the Berkeley Inn on that site suffered a major fire, and was ordered demolished. Some two decades later that property is still a vacant lot, having passed through two owners and numerous development proposals.

The future of the Sequoia Building can follow a different, more productive path. We encourage reuse of this historic building and offer any and all support we can provide. Please do not hesitate to contact our office for any reason.

Sincerely,

Steven Finacom

Vice President, Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association

On behalf of the Board of Directors of BAHA; approved by unanimous vote at the Board meeting of November 21, 2011