

Graves House decision puts Bluffton historic district at risk

By Michael Bedenbaugh

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On Wednesday evening, Bluffton's Historic Preservation Commission voted to allow the demolition of the Graves House, a contributing member of a National Register District. It was an astonishing outcome from a body that was put into place for the specific purpose to protect Bluffton's historic district, and especially, the individual contributing properties.

The owner of the house, as well as the purchaser, stated that the house was too deteriorated for rehabilitation. Everyone in the room heard their architect say the building did not meet current standards of the building code, and many of us had read the two engineering reports stating the structure was unsound and unsafe.

As executive director of the Palmetto Trust for Historic Preservation, South Carolina's statewide preservation organization, I am compelled to say that a tragedy occurred in this ill-thought decision.

Historic districts are assets that benefit the whole community. These covenants were put into place through an open democratic process in which the people of Bluffton chose, through their elected leaders, to put in place the historic overlay that is supposed to provide protection. No one person should have the right to assume he or she can come into a protected historic district, purchase a property whose value represents those protections, then strip off those protections and flip it for a price that does not reflect the protective covenants. If that were allowed, then historic districts all over the state and nation would be imperiled.

My two decades of preservation rehabilitation experience allows me to confidently state that the Graves House's overall structural integrity is sound. Yes, there is deterioration in parts of the house, and especially in the addition. But to believe, as the owner's attorney stated in Wednesday's meeting, that it would take \$800,000 to restore this medium-sized house is nothing short of ludicrous. The issues of current building codes are negligent since its status on the National Registry allows for many issues to be grandfathered and allowed. For the commission to only take the word of hired representatives brought to the meeting, and not pursue the opinion of the many builders and architects who could speak on behalf of the house's integrity, was unfortunate. Every day, profit-motivated speculators hire engineers to put a stamp of authority on their plans.

What was most astonishing was the lack of understanding regarding the status of the house as a contributing member of a National Register District, and the belief, as stated by the owner's representatives, that the house being sympathetically dismantled and materials reused in the new structure, would not compromise its National Registry status. Unfortunately, my pleas to the

contrary were pushed aside by those who had already made up their minds and were not interested in obtaining more information.

I do believe the commission members wanted to do what was right and correct for the community, but those who voted in favor of demolition failed in their task. However, their failure was not only because of the owners purchased engineering reports and whether the house was on the National Register; they also failed because of fear.

The owners' attorney was very effective in pushing serious consequences if his client did not get his way. The fear of being sued, the fear of people getting hurt, and fear of the house sitting vacant and deteriorating for years were results of the attorney's very strategic communication.

Threats of lawsuits and negligence notwithstanding, some things are worth fighting for, and this was one of them. The commission's disregard of its duty to protect the unique character of Bluffton's historic district because of one owner's personal goals and his attorney's rhetorical manipulations will cause tremendous damage to its ability to protect future properties.

Unfortunately, the board set a precedent that will be difficult to overcome unless the town's political leadership and administration put in place some reforms that could mitigate the ability of individuals to override the goals of the community at large. The unfortunate outcome if this issue is not addressed is that the district could become so compromised by strategies like those employed Wednesday evening that it ceases to be a true historic district for a commission to protect.

(Michael Bedenbaugh was at the time of this article Executive Director for the *Palmetto Trust for Historic Preservation*. That organization has since changed its name to *Preservation South Carolina* and Mike is the current Executive Director of that organization.)