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### **Some owners balk at historic designation**

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At issue is impacton development

## Staff Writer

Some Collegetown property owners are calling the potential historic designations of their buildings unsafe, unfair and an attempt to stop development.

The city officials behind the list of historic resources in Collegetown say they're trying to protect a legacy of beauty that will ultimately strengthen the city's culture, economy and desirability as a tourist destination.

Planning Board Chairman John Schroeder and Common Council Alderwoman Mary Tomlan, D-3rd, have compiled a list of 31 "Collegetown Historic Resources Worthy of Detailed Research." Both the 2007 Collegetown vision statement and the proposed Collegetown Urban Plan call for identifying historic resources in Collegetown.

The 31 resources, primarily buildings, are being studied this summer for a variety of historic recognitions, including potentially formal historic designation, which would prevent a property owner from tearing a building down and redeveloping it. Both the Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission and Common Council have to approve new historic designations.

Joe Leonardo, owner of the Royal Palm Tavern, said some of the identified properties could be worthy of historic designation, but the Royal Palm is not one of them.

Tomlan said the Royal Palm is historic in part because "it's not like any other bar in Collegetown."

"It's a very distinctive facade with its round windows and with its distinctive entranceway," Tomlan said. "And it has been so well kept up; I mean, they do such a good job of keeping it painted. It's been an image on the Collegetown streetscape for many decades."

Leonardo said he paints the facade so often because "every year the front of it falls off."

"Why didn't she (Tomlan) come to me and ask me what I thought? It's going to decrease the value of my property because no one can develop on it if it becomes a historic landmark," Leonardo said. "Is that my reward for keeping this business in the family for the past 70 years? They're just anti-development, and it's pretty transparent what they're trying to do."

Historic recognition is a part of good planning, tourism and economic development, Schroeder argued.

"I've said throughout this that I strongly want and desire redevelopment of certain areas of Collegetown to happen," he said, citing the 300 block of College Avenue as one he'd love to see redeveloped, and the east side of the 400 block as one that should be preserved.

"Appreciating historic resources is part of what makes a community a community," Schroeder said. "It helps us understand our links to past generations, what they bequeathed to us. It helps link, especially in a college town, past generations of Cornellians, perhaps the parents of current students, to current generations and future generations of Cornellians and Ithacans. It's part of what attracts tourists to a community. It's part of what gives a unique sense of place, a special sense of character."

Historic preservation is important, but so is providing an adequate supply of safe housing close to campus, argued property owner George Avramis. His building at 403 College Ave. is on the list of historic resources.

"(Having) older wood-frame buildings in that kind of densely populated area is, I think, a very dangerous approach to take," he said.

The building next door, 407 College Ave., burned to the ground in 1998 when a fire that started in a first-floor restaurant spread quickly through the building, he said.

"Someday I would like to tear it (403 College Ave.) down and put up a nice, new, triple-A-fire-rated building, fully ADA handicap accessible, like 400 College Ave., the Starbucks building," Avramis said.

Sarah Iams lives at 116 Oak Ave., which is cooperatively owned by the Gamma Alpha Graduate Scientific Association. Iams said her biggest concern with the possibility of a historic designation is the extra time and effort involved in getting city approval for maintenance issues.

Once a building is designated historic, any exterior maintenance or lot changes have to be approved by the Ithaca Landmarks Preservation Commission. Interior maintenance does not require approval.

"As a graduate student co-operative that maintains the property ourselves, processes that might seem like small administrative hassles for a typical landlord or homeowner are a strong barrier to our successful operation," Iams said by e-mail.

Tomlan said she's talking with city staff about setting up a public meeting in Collegetown sometime this summer for property owners and others to come learn about and provide input on the historic resources proposal.

Alderman Svante Myrick, D-4th, is the only student on Ithaca's 10-member Common Council, and he's been the most vocal proponent for redevelopment in Collegetown.

"I think some of the sites are absolutely worth historic preservation, mainly Cascadilla (Hall) and the (College Avenue) bridge," Myrick

said. "But I'm glad they're doing more research on this because I'm not convinced that this is not a thinly veiled effort to stop development in the areas where the zoning's going to change."

Tomlan, an architectural historian, said she views the historic resources list "as a positive thing, not an obstructionist thing."

"I would not want to see it as stopping development," Tomlan said. "It is a recognition that our community is layered by its history and that our lives can be enriched by knowing and seeing pieces of that history. There's nothing thinly veiled about it. It is a positive statement about the value of our aesthetic and cultural past."

At 7 p.m. this Wednesday, Common Council's Planning Committee will hear a report on the Collegetown Historic Resources list. They're also scheduled for a public hearing and a vote on the Collegetown Urban Plan. The meeting is at City Hall, 108 E. Green St.

The most recent version of the Collegetown plan is at [www.cityofithaca.org](http://www.cityofithaca.org).

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