

Friends of Historic Flemington

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Flemington Redevelopment Committee Meets with Preservation Experts

Flemington Borough's designated redeveloper wants to demolish the Union Hotel and three other 19th century buildings in the heart of Flemington's historic downtown to make way for a four-acre, seven- and eight-story mixed-use complex with 900 parking spaces. Last week, two national experts presented the case for adapting historic buildings for re-use, meeting with Borough officials to explain how maintaining a community's historic assets has proven time and time again to create jobs, increase property value, and attract investment and tourism.

Seri Worden, a Senior Field Officer with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, and Richard Southwick, Partner and Director of Historic Preservation at award-winning architecture and planning firm Beyer Blinder Bell and also a Preservation New Jersey board member, met with Flemington Mayor Phil Griener, Council Vice President Brooke Liebowitz, and Councilman Brian Swingle who together comprise Flemington Borough's Redevelopment Committee. They were joined by Flemington Borough architect Christopher Pickell.

"The National Trust recognizes that town officials want to redevelop and reinvigorate downtown Flemington to encourage much needed economic growth," Ms. Worden said. "Demolition of historic buildings is rarely a change for the better. Decades of experience in the wake of urban renewal have proven this repeatedly across the United States in small villages and towns as well as our largest cities. Historic Preservation can and should play a role."

Recent National Trust research, now available in a report titled *Older, Smaller, Better* demonstrates that established neighborhoods with a mix of older, smaller buildings perform better than districts with larger, newer structures when tested against a range of economic, social and environmental measures.

Mr. Southwick went on to explain, "Flemington has everything it needs for successful adaptive redevelopment:

- A set of available buildings in relatively good condition in a good location.
- A town and its politicians supportive of redevelopment.
- A developer committed to Flemington with the resources to invest in the town.
- A population mobilized to support, indeed assist, in a careful historic preservation project.

"The right solution for this town, at this time, and this specific location is so very obvious," he said.

He went on to describe three case studies: in the South Street Seaport section of New York City; in Harrisburg, the state capital of Pennsylvania; and at Ellis Island.

At the Seaport, adaptive reuse of existing building stock defined and was the catalyst for the success of the whole district, which is now a vibrant 24/7 mixed use neighborhood.

In Harrisburg, for years, the traditional commercial center of Pennsylvania's state capital was all but deserted after 5 pm. Now the area incorporates a successful mixed use development with many of the same uses proposed for Main Street Flemington: retail, residences, hotel and education. The character of the development was retained by utilizing historic 19th and 20th century buildings and the complex has become Harrisburg's town square, truly creating a distinctive sense of place.

On Ellis Island, the buildings were in horrendous condition after being abandoned for half a century. Trees were growing out of holes in the roof and plaster was dripping from interior walls. Water had been pouring in from open windows. Still, Mr. Southwick confirmed, "This was all recoverable with the right skills and motivation. The Union Hotel is in far better condition. It has only been vacant a few years." And, he explained, "It is actually a very easy rehabilitation, with Historic Investment Tax Credits available for parts of the project."

The National Trust for Historic Preservation designated Historic Downtown Flemington as one of the 11 Most Endangered Historic Sites in the entire United States in early October 2016. Preservation New Jersey placed the Union Hotel at the top of its 2016 Most Endangered Historic Places list. The Hunterdon County Cultural and Heritage Commission named The Union Hotel, the Fulper Building at 78 Main Street, and the Hunterdon County National Bank at 90-100 Main Street to their 2016 Most Endangered List.

The Friends of Historic Flemington believe the demolition of the Union Hotel and three adjacent buildings in the heart of the county seat's historic district is unnecessary. They advocate for the adaptive reuse of Flemington's significant historic buildings, including the Union Hotel, as critical components of a thoughtfully designed and properly scaled downtown development.

Learn more about the group at www.FriendsofHistoricFlemington.com.

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