



June 30, 2010

City Council
Rochester Hills
1000 Rochester Hills Drive
Rochester Hills, MI 48309

Re: Elimination of Historic District, 1585 South Rochester Road

Dear Members of Council:

This letter is in response to the Final Report issued by the Rochester Hills Historic District Study Committee for 1585 South Rochester Road. The report is the result of a request for the elimination of the historic district at that address that you referred to the HDSC on September 28, 2009. Prior to that meeting, the property owner requested our firm inspect the building, prepare a scope of work for its restoration, secure estimates for the cost of doing the scope of work, and determine the feasibility of the building's future use.

We concluded the building lacks design integrity due to a series of negative changes over the years, inappropriate material choices, and poor workmanship. Furthermore, based upon the building's condition, location, difficult layout, size, proportion, and the extreme cost of restoration, we opined that its reuse is not economically feasible.

Our report stated, *"It is likely much of the original trim was removed when the house was clad and that whatever remains is damaged by the application of the aluminum and exposure to the elements. Given degree of reconstruction necessary due to the lack of original detail, the excessive decay from exposure to the elements, the pervasion of black mold and the obsolescence of the mechanical and electrical systems, work to the Fairview Farmhouse is more aptly characterized as a replication than a restoration."*

I went on to say, *"It is my opinion, based upon thirty-six years of experience as a registered architect working with historic structures, that the Fairview Farmhouse is not readily adaptable for office, retail or any other commercial use due to its size, proportion, type of construction, lack of accessibility and residential layout. In addition, no appropriate nonresidential use for the building can be identified that will directly enhance the residential development of the remaining property, such as gift shop, party store, management office or clubhouse... Therefore, by elimination, the building must be viewed strictly as a residential structure. At the cost of nearly \$350/SF (relocated) and with its compromising layout, unusual, non-original façade and incongruous siting, the farmhouse will be virtually unsalable or unleaseable. Therefore, I conclude that restoring the building is not economically feasible."* Please note that the \$1,230,000 cost to restore and relocate the building would be much higher if a commercial use was chosen.

After reviewing a draft of the November 25, 2009 HDSC Preliminary Report, the State Historic Preservation Office staff comments of December 2, 2009, and the June 10, 2010 HDSC Final Report, our position remains unchanged. Please consider the following:

According to the Rochester Hills Historic District ordinance, to consider elimination of a historic district, the Historic District Study Committee must follow a set procedure and show one or more of the following:

- Lost Physical Characteristics
- Insignificance
- Defective Procedure

Although the HDSC report states the fact that “the property did not meet national registry criteria is not valid grounds to de-designate a single resource historic district designated before 2002”, the HDSC is now attempting to fit the criteria to the house. Contrary to its own draft report in which it called for de-designation due to insignificance, it now calls the building significant. The 1993 SHPO field notes characterize it as contributing not significant. The register criteria HDSC deems relevant to the designation of the building, including criteria A and C, states:

*“The quality of **significance** in American History, architecture, archeology, engineering and culture is present in districts, sites, buildings, structures and objects that possess the **integrity of location design, setting materials, workmanship, feeling and association** and*

*A. are associated with **events** that have made a **significant** contribution to the broad patterns of our history and*

*C. and that embody the **distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or that represents the work of a master or that possess high artistic values** or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.”*

We believe that the house at 1585 South Rochester Road fails to meet the National Registry criteria on many levels. The building should be de-designated on the grounds of **insignificance: the historic district is not significant in a way previously defined.**

1. **The building and the site no longer have integrity of location and setting.** By initially designating only the building and 100 feet surrounding it, the “agricultural theme” was lost due to the removal of the outbuildings, the encroachment of development, and the intensifying of traffic. Furthermore, the 2002 Historic Districts Survey states “A farmhouse alone is significant under the theme of agriculture only when it is associated with a farm of outstanding significance to the agricultural history of the township.” The HDSC report does not make a strong case that Fairview farm was more significant than any other farm. The likening of Wayne Eddy’s owning Fairview Farm to the William Fisher and John Dodge farm estates is a stretch. The house at 1585 South Rochester Road does not compare to Meadowbrook Hall.
2. **The structure does not possess integrity of design, materials or workmanship.** As stated in the HDSC Preliminary Report, *“From a distance the house appears intact, just with the addition of aluminum siding. Closer inspection reveals that there is not a high level of integrity of design. The house appears cobbled together with many different elements. The front porch columns are not typical of columns typical in the style in that they are thin square columns with trim pieces added. There is vertical aluminum siding around the top of the front porch where an entablature would typically be located. The corner boards and dentils are covered with aluminum trim. The front door has been replaced with a standard panel door and the door surround is not correctly proportioned, in particular the strip of dentil molding at the top.”* The porch, which is concrete on brick

walls with prefabricated concrete front steps, is incongruous as it is attached to a frame house on a fieldstone foundation. The workmanship is poor as evidenced by the construction of the porch columns that are square, boxed columns with standard off-the-shelf moldings as corner trim. These materials are substandard and were used for convenience and economy. The accompanying photographs of an exemplary neoclassical house stand in sharp contrast to the photographs of Fairview Farmhouse

3. **The structure is not an exemplary example of the neoclassical style.**

The esteemed book quoted by the report, Virginia and Lee McAlester's *Field Guide to American Houses*, describes the neoclassical style as being dominated by a full height porch with a roof supported by classic columns and having a façade with symmetrically balanced windows and center door. Indeed, all five common variations of the style, termed "*principle sub-types*" in the book, have symmetrical facades and when side wings are added it is done so symmetrically. The main façade of 1585 Rochester Road is asymmetrical; the front door is in the third of three bays, not centered as is typical in a neoclassical design. Also, the large wing to the east is not balanced by a matching west wing. Of the thirty-one photographic examples of neoclassical style houses in the McAlester book, not one has an asymmetrical façade or a single wing flanking it.

4. **The design is not representative of a master nor does it possess high artistic values.**

A question exists as to whether the architect of the building was THE John Burns. Even if he was, the building is not a strong example of the neoclassical style. This design is attempt at a stylistic transformation onto which the existing Queen Anne building imposed great compromise. The design imitates the neoclassical style by introducing elements of the style, but for all the reasons stated above is not worthy of designation.

We conclude that the house at 1585 South Rochester Road should no longer be designated as a local historic district, as it is insignificant. Additionally, if the building were to come up for consideration for the first time today, we believe it is unlikely it would be designated. The building and the site no longer have integrity of location and setting; the structure does not possess integrity of design, materials, or workmanship; the structure is not an exemplary example of the neoclassical style; and the design is not representative of a master, nor does it possess high artistic values.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Respectfully,
FINNICUM BROWNLIE ARCHITECTS, INC.



William L. Finnicum, NCARB
President



1585 South Rochester Road



Exemplary Neoclassical Detail



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