

DESIGN
ADVOCACY
GROUP
of Philadelphia

February 6, 2004

City Council President Anna Verna
City Hall, Room 405
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19107-3290

RE: BILL NO. 040003

Dear President Verna,

The Design Advocacy Group strongly opposes Bill No. 040003. Historic buildings and neighborhoods are Philadelphia's most valuable material assets, and we believe this bill will put these assets at risk by politicizing the creation of historic districts and forbidding the designation of historic buildings within huge areas of this remarkable city.

The proposed City Council takeover of historic district designation discards the system that has maintained a careful balance between preservation and development, and thereby created Philadelphia's popular and highly regarded Society Hill, Rittenhouse-Fitler, Girard Estate, Old City and Spring Garden districts. It subverts a process that now requires several levels of public notice, consultation and comment guided by expert and professional planning. The question of designation would now be subject to special interest lobbying, and the custom of deferring to individual Council Members on matters pertaining to their own districts would likely denude the process of the merest trappings of democracy. The proposed legislation does not even require that Council act-whether positively or negatively-on the district proposals that it receives from the Historical Commission.

Even more troubling is the Bill's sweeping ban on the designation of historic buildings within gigantic areas that are vaguely defined as those touched by "any urban renewal plan, any city Neighborhood Transformation Initiative development plan, and/or any city redevelopment project." This is tantamount to declaring that our poorer neighborhoods have nothing that is worth preserving and that their citizens have no right to enjoy the simple pleasures of sense and spirit that come from living with history. Our efforts to renew and transform our city must protect and respect that right for all its citizens.

This is not a matter of preservation versus development, an artificial and false conflict. Philadelphia can point with pride to a successful record of encouraging new development while protecting our irreplaceable and unique assets. As we move forward with new endeavors, we must continue to exercise the same balanced approach. The past is not something that politicians can define for us or deny to us. We demand the careful, consultative, and expert management of the artifacts of our history, and we claim a share of our history for each of us.

Sincerely,

The Design Advocacy Group of Philadelphia

William P. Becker,
Chair

Cc: The Honorable John Street, Mayor, City of Philadelphia

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