

Jodi Baldwin
1395 Sherwood Road
Aurora, NY 13026

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Village of Aurora Planning Board
456 Main Street
Aurora, NY 13026

Dear Members of the Planning Board;

My name is Jodi and I am a board member on the Preservation Association of Central New York, representing Cayuga County. In addition to this letter, I am submitting for the files, my letter to PACNY regarding this matter as well as my joint letter to Preservation Association of New York State and New York State Parks & Historic Sites.

I reside just outside of the historic Village of Aurora. One of the reasons I was attracted to my old farmhouse, which although livable was not at all in great condition when I purchased it, was the proximity to this very quaint, historic and seemingly undisturbed Village of Aurora. I had grown up in Borodino, which was almost 10 miles to the Village of Skaneateles, and although Aurora is significantly smaller, the proposition of being only a few miles outside of a village with a college and intellectual community activities and some basic shops and people, community, was INCREDIBLY attractive and a large factor in my moving from Auburn to here.

As an “outsider” who did not grow up here, did not go to school here, am not employed by or in a relationship with any employee of Wells college or the Inns of Aurora, and being that my creation, Howland Farm Museum, is a community organization that is free and open to the public, I have no economic dependency on these aforementioned entities, I am able to enjoy the freedom of clear thought, unbiased critical thinking and observation because I have no loyalties or connections which would skew my perceptions.

It is within my blissfully unfettered observations and reflections of THE FACTS, that the proposed demolition of the Wells College owned McGordon House at 110 Main Street in Aurora raises serious concerns and red flags to me. I will be addressing these concerns in regards to the State Environmental Quality Review.

But before I get into that, I want to first thank Jim Burkett, the Chair of the Community Preservation Panel, for his very clear and organized chairmanship of Monday’s meeting. This is my first time participating in any level of local government, and observing what was said on Monday, I came to the understanding that this whole process is very similar to and quite comparable to a court case. I was under the impression that these small village matters and public hearings were basically where rational people got together and made decisions for the well being of everyone in the community because that is choosing the path of love and compassion and the obvious thing to do.

Clearly I was wrong, and hearing the discussion of the CPP and how it sounded to me like their “hands were tied” in this matter, I began to get clarity on how this process really works. The application for a demolition permit, to me, seems *like* to a Plaintiff filing a case. The people, the community arguing against the application, to me seemed very much *like* we were the Defendants. And in observing this process from the point of view of my very simple comparison to a court case, I thought, well it follows then that the McGordon house in question, is very much *like* the evidence. Very much *like* the primary evidence it seemed. And if this was a court case, both the Plaintiff and the Defendant would have access to the evidence and analysing it by their own experts so that each side could then present a full argument. Of course, this is not a real court case, but it feels very similar in structure because the CPP made their decision based on evidence and documentation that was included in the files of this application. And all of that evidence and documentation was submitted by Kevin Fitzgerald of Aurora Rt 90 Group / Wells College.

Chris MacCormick of the CPP, who voted against demolition, expressed disappointment in the series of events that had led up to this point and intentions of learning from them to prevent further instances like this. He made a comment how important it would be, essential even, for the CPP to be allowed into the building in question. When I heard Chris’ comment, which is on the record, expressing how the house (which to me seems *like* primary evidence) was only accessible to the parties submitting the application, a red flag of concern popped into my head; alerting me to some sort of impartiality, and of lack of substantial evidence to fairly come to a democratic vote.

This alone, to me, makes it feel like if it WAS an actual court case, there would be full grounds for a mistrial.

I mention all of this to not only have on the record but because it all factors into the informed comments the public could be making for this Public Hearing for the SEQR.

How can we, the public, make adequate, intelligent and well informed arguments if we do not have access to the house? Not individually of course, but through unbiased professionals providing unbiased reports of the costs for renovation and an assessment of the condition that isn’t motivated by the client’s own goals. We can speak generally in this SEQR, but we don’t have access to all of the information that is essential for arguing a point, because we were never allowed access to the house, which to me seems *like* the main piece of evidence.

On the afternoon of April 11th, I made it a point to look at the file folder for this case and photograph all of its contents so I could at least have access to some sort of documentation.

From my point of view, not as simply a resident, but as a professional who has been in the field of preservation for 15 years, owns several historic properties which I personally do the work at when required, had a father in construction and worked in film and television visiting a plethora of historic sites of all levels of conditions and closely collaborating with fellow union members in the construction department who built replicas of every manner of structure and building, the documentation that I saw in the file only SUPPORTS that the McGordon house is in no need of being demolished AND speaks to the magnitude of the Environmental Impact which demolition would create.

The Environmental Impact of the House / Structure itself:

Bergmann Architects, Engineers and Planners, out of Rochester, provided Kevin Fitzgerald / Aurora Rt 90 Group with a structural report of the McGordon house, dated January 10, 2023. This report was accompanied with 70 photos.

After reading this report and studying the photos, it is clear to me that the McGordon house does not need to be demolished. The majority of photos showed more cosmetic issues and the only evidence I observed indicating immediate structural problems included the rotting 8 x 8 or 10 x 10 vertical support beams in the basement, which could be replaced in a day with appropriate metal support braces. Included several compromised roof joists, which would need further investigation to determine if the entire roof needed to be removed, replace certain joists, redecked and re-roofed. OR if the compromised roof joists would just need to be stabilized, which can effectively be accomplished in several ways. Again, without access to see the attic myself or with an independent firm, I can do not have substantial evidence to comment further. And included the chimney, which could affordably be simply removed and not replaced.

As far as environmental impact is concerned, replacing an entire roof is still less of an impact than building an entire new building. Removing a chimney and repurposing the bricks has less of an environmental impact than building a new building and adding to the waste stream.

While the report from Bergmann Architects, Engineers and Planners concludes with their very vague statement that the costs would be prohibitive for restoration, the actual evidence that their report shows, indicates, by my review and experience, that McGordon house is an absolutely viable structure, which could be sold to an interested party and renovated, thus contributing to the housing stock and economy of this village AND therefore significantly reducing the environmental impact both the action of demolition would have, and the long term impact that near future development to build a house to replace this already existing one would create.

Thus, the Environmental Impact of demolition includes the needless waste of building materials that already exist in the structure, the waste of raw materials used to build a new construction house from the ground up as opposed to only replacing what is necessary in the existing home. And the impact of contributing to a waste stream which is already overwhelmed. According to the EPA 2018 Fact Sheet "Demolition represents more than 90% of C&D debris generation, while construction represents less than 10%"

The EPA also notes benefits of "reducing the amount of C&D materials disposed of" stating that a project could "reduce overall building project expenses through avoided purchases / disposal costs". This statement validates the concern that many people in the community expressed regarding the accuracy of the extremely high cost estimates to renovate instead of building new, submitted with the application. However, since we were not allowed to obtain an unbiased report made, there is not substantial evidence to support our arguments.

Another long term environmental affect the demolition of the McGordon house could have is setting the precedence for fast demolition over thoughtful renovation, thus initiating a trend of demolishing other perfectly viable houses for the purpose of profit driven development. Skaneateles, as a community, is already feeling the negative environmental impact of this trend due to the needless demolition of lakefront cottages for the purpose of building giant mansions. This trend, this impact that demolition would have, is of very high magnitude and importance to

the entire extended community of Southern Cayuga County as it feeds into the cycle of higher assessments on properties, increased taxes, increased population displacement and disruption of community.

Denying the demolition of McGordon house would help mitigate these environmental impacts by reducing landfill waste, reducing building materials required for a viable housing unit keeping a diversity of properties in the housing stock.

Environmental Impact of the Property / Surrounding Lands:

Demolition of the McGordon house would have short term and long term affects to the property. If there is lead or asbestos or other hazerdous materials in the house, that would need to be determined before demolition so that the proper steps can be taken for disposal. The house is located near a body of water and the watershed that feeds into it, making it a sensitive site requiring care.

Additionally, the demolition of McGordon could very likely set a trend of housing development in the south portion of Wells Campus, further disrupting established wildlife corridors and habitats, which were outlined in the report Erin Weber submitted. Keeping this space a healthy, wild ecosystem is important not only to the water quality but also the quality of life of the local residents who are able to enjoy the space for recreation.

It can not be underestimated how significant the long term impacts are on demolition of a viable structure instead of choosing to renovate it. It is a mindset. And the implications of continuing to choose the mindset of waste and replacement and disposability are of such profound magnitude that our entire world is under duress. The magnitude and importance of this mindset of demolition instead of repair is exponential.

Environmental Impact of Community / Culture:

I want to note specifically that I would consider the first environmental impact of the proposed demolition of the McGordon house on a community / cultural level to be the Mayor of Aurora's decision to not renew the Village Historian's appointment, in a suspiciously directly related retaliation.

Included in the paperwork and documentation for demolition application are surveys from the Cultural Resource information System of New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation. These surveys, again, under my review and expertise, actually fully support the DENIAL of the application for demolition.

These surveys clearly show the location of McGordon house centered right between MAJOR sites of archaeological significance. While they also clearly show that nothing has been found at the exact site of the house in question, the positioning between such significant cultural sites

is a clear indication that the probability of cultural importance of the property the McGordon house sits on, is extremely high.

I don't know if it's ignorance or willful arrogance to be completely overlooking that the indigenous people's whose culture is under discussion in regards to these archeological sites, are STILL HERE. This demolition application and discussion seems to be to be approaching these sites and the impacts as they are gone and of no concern. But not only are they still here, they are still suffering the trauma's inflicted upon them by 244 years of lack of established home lands, colonialism by our governments AND a recent rash of actual, literal terrorism by Clint Halftown, the self proclaimed leader of the Cayuga Nation.

It is beyond shameful that the Village of Aurora, the governments of Cayuga County, Governor Hochul and the State of New York and the Federal Government and BIA are all continuing to make daily decisions and actions that do nothing but reinforce the continuation of nearly 250 years of exploitation, oppression and abuse.

The proposed demolition of the McGordon house, or any future development within the still undeveloped areas along the southern portion of the Wells College campus, all has environmental impacts of the greatest magnitude and importance possible. To look at the Long Term effects of this environmental impact - the Gayogohó:nq' peoples have already been suffering. SUFFERING the effects of the environmental impact of the destruction and development of their Chonodote, "Peachtown" village for 244 years. Any further demolition, land disturbance, or development that is not under the title, ownership and lead of the traditional first nations' peoples will continue to bear the greatest impact a culture and group of people could possibly endure.

Sincerely,

Jodi Baldwin

Owner / Creator



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