

# BOSTON PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

www.bostonpreservation.org

February 29, 2024

Dear Mayor Wu,

For over 45 years, the Boston Preservation Alliance has served as a unifying voice in Boston, advocating for the preservation of places that matter to Boston residents, students, workers, and visitors. We helped save local icons like Fenway Park and the Theatre District, and we continue to advocate for places across the city that hold history, memory, and sense of place in our communities. When we engage with a development project or initiative, our goal is to be able to support that project. We suggest things like modifications to make new construction more contextual in its streetscape, best practices for the treatment of historic materials, and policy changes that give more voice to residents about what happens in their neighborhoods.

At the same time, if we believe that the best interests of Boston's historic resources are not being served it is our responsibility to express our concerns to all stakeholders and decision-makers. We share concerns with many others that current City and BPDA practices, even when well-intentioned, lack the transparency, public engagement, and justification that your campaign promised to voters.

We are writing to offer our suggestions to help you fulfill your policy goals in a manner that respects established City processes and public input while introducing productive changes:

Yes, the city needs more affordable housing. We support the new program to repurpose suitable commercial buildings for housing and encourage incentivizing adaptive reuse over demolition. Building reuse IS climate action, and we must prioritize adaptive and continued use of naturally-occurring affordability over demolition and ground-up new construction that is too often less affordable and under-designed. Other cities, such as Portland, Oregon and San Antonio, Texas, have successfully adopted building reuse, deconstruction, and salvage policies to balance growth with climate action and affordability. New construction is one solution to our affordability crisis, not the only solution. We strongly support programs, like the office conversion and Accessory Dwelling Unit initiatives, that will add housing and density into our existing urban fabric.

Yes, the city needs to streamline the development process and create more predictability, not just for the benefit of developers but for property owners who are constantly looking over their shoulders for the next proposal that might threaten something they value. Public engagement is essential to ensure that neighborhoods retain their unique qualities. We applaud you and your administration for taking bold action to solve complicated, long-standing problems with Boston's development process. However, we are hearing from residents who, after decades of mistreatment by the BRA, question expedited decisions that seemingly take more power away from residents and give it to developers. Residents deserve transparency in these policy changes. As the Alliance has historically collaborated with the City, we would like to aid in communication and help build confidence in your policy and process proposals.

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Yes, we have problems to fix in zoning, planning, and design review. We are concerned that your administration appears to be undermining existing public processes, like the Landmark process or Landmarks Commission review of historic resources, as we saw play out with the Buckminster Hotel and now, with White Stadium. We hope that it is not your intent to circumvent these review and approval processes, as these kinds of actions suggest, which would further engender public skepticism.

This administration has proven that it knows how to do public engagement well. The Design Vision process engaged a diverse community advisory board, held meetings that delved into the details of what makes our neighborhoods unique, historic, and desirable, and proposed development strategies that allow for appropriately scaled new construction with design elements that complement the surrounding architecture and character of the neighborhood. We urge your leadership team to incorporate this approach of public engagement into all aspects of planning. Each effort should start with a robust public discussion and survey of what we have and what we value, what works and why, and then identify ways to grow that enhance our communities. The new Squares & Streets initiative, advancing at a dizzying pace, should begin this way. Our organization has constructive ideas of how to do surveys and engage residents and business owners that we would be happy to discuss further.

The Alliance has a strong history of finding commonality amongst divergent perspectives. We would like to help bring more people to the table to set a strong foundation for the transformative actions your administration is undertaking. We are committed to many of the same goals: promoting sensitive development, climate action, and affordability while protecting historic character and culture, livability and walkability, local and legacy businesses, open space, and more.

We believe that through regular meetings with you and members of your leadership team to share more perspectives and ideas, discuss concerns, and help communicate your vision to our broad network we can be constructive advocates. We are confident that with more collaboration we can create a framework for growth that both preserves and enhances our beautiful, historic city.

The Boston Preservation Alliance looks forward to hearing from you to arrange for continued dialogue.

Thank you,



Alison Frazee  
Executive Director