



STATE OF RHODE ISLAND

HISTORICAL PRESERVATION & HERITAGE COMMISSION

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23 November 2022

Via email: [davisonbeaux@juno.com](mailto:davisonbeaux@juno.com)

Davison Bolster  
Chair  
Town of Warren Voluntary Historic Preservation Program  
514 Main Street  
Warren, Rhode Island 02885

Re: Proposed demolition and new construction  
113 and 119 Water Street  
Warren, Rhode Island

Dear Mr. Bolster:

I have received your request for an opinion on the proposed demolition of two buildings in Warren. You have informed me that a proposal has been made to demolish the buildings at 113 and 119 Water Street and to construct a single building on the site, which has the Warren Tax Assessor's identification Map 2 Lot 21. I have reviewed a draft "Report on Proposed Demolition of 113 and 119 Water Street" prepared by you or the members of the Warren Voluntary Historic Preservation Program, and images of the existing buildings and the proposed new construction that you supplied, and have made a site visit to view the buildings and the surrounding area from public rights-of-way. I have not reviewed any materials that were submitted to the Town for review by the developer, most notably conditions or structural reports about the existing buildings. As Interim Executive Director of the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission (RIHPHC), I am providing the below advisory opinion in response to your request because it relates to historic properties that are not otherwise (to our knowledge) subject to RIHPHC review.

Both 113 and 119 Water Street are contributing buildings in the Warren Waterfront Historic District, which is listed in the National Register of Historic Places. 113 Water Street is identified in the nomination form for the district as a two-and-one-half-story house constructed circa 1865, but possibly an earlier house moved to the site. 119 Water Street is identified in the nomination as a two-and-one-half-story, commercial/residential building constructed circa 1900, with an original three-bay storefront, recessed center entrance, and oriel windows on the second story.

As contributing buildings in the National Register Historic District, demolition of 113 and 119 Water Street would have an adverse effect not only on the buildings, themselves, but also on the district, as a whole. The removal of a historic building should only be done as a last resort. Once the building is demolished, it cannot be reconstructed because the elements that contribute to its historic integrity are lost. Even a copy of a historic building suffers the lack of patina acquired over decades - or in this case, 100-plus years - of settling, weather, layers of paint, and even ill-advised small changes.

Rehabilitation of the historic buildings to meet the needs of the project proponent should be the first goal in designing the project. Only in extreme cases is it not possible to save a historic building; structural issues can be fixed, new systems can be installed, and code requirements can be met, often by utilizing the historic rehabilitation code. We recognize that there is sometimes an economic point where saving a historic building is not fiscally prudent, however, we would recommend pursuing all options, including historic preservation tax credits, in assessing where this breaking point lies.

The Warren Waterfront Historic District gains its significance in part from being a unified collection of buildings that present a historic appearance and provide a historic “feel” through their historic features. The historical integrity of the district is maintained through the presence of historic building materials, forms, massing, styles, siting, and other elements that are present throughout. This is reflected in the National Register nomination, which states, “Warren’s waterfront district enjoys remarkable homogeneity of scale and character. Most of the buildings are made of wood and stand two or three stories high... Street setbacks are generally consistent throughout the district...” In this case, the two buildings that are proposed to be demolished are two-and-one-half-story, wood-framed, residential-scale buildings; exactly the types of buildings that the nomination is focused on.

You provided two images showing the proposed new construction: one appears to be a rendering of the new building superimposed on a Google streetview facing northwest and the other is an elevation comparison of 155, 125, and the proposed new building at 119 Water Street. The new building is shown as three stories plus a full fourth story in a mansard, with commercial storefronts on the first floor, a slightly-projecting, two-bay center section over a recessed entrance, wide horizontal siding, and paired, one-over-one sash windows. The building, with three differentiated sections, extends deep into the lot. The building heights given on the comparison drawing do not appear to be accurate (for example, the top height for 119 Water Street is given as 1’6”) and the drawing does not have a scale bar. However, in comparison to the four-story building at 155 Water Street, the proposed building appears almost a full story taller. It is worth noting that 155 Water Street is over 250 feet south of 119 Water Street, with three shorter buildings between the two, and that the buildings to the north and south of 119 are each only two-and-one-half stories tall.

The proposed building is not compatible with its surroundings and its insertion would result in an adverse effect on the historic district. The RIHPHC applies the Secretary of the Interior’s *Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* (Standards) to our review of new construction within historic districts. The proposed building will feature prominently in the historic streetscape, in a detrimental fashion. It will be taller and larger in scale than the surrounding historic buildings, and appears to utilize materials that are not historic. Overall, the size, scale, proportion, and materials are incompatible with the historic district. The building will diminish the integrity of the historic streetscape and is inconsistent with Secretary’s Standard 9, which states:

*New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.*

Should the demolition of the two historic buildings and construction of a new building be approved, the design of the new building must be harmonious with its surroundings. While not creating a false sense of history by replicating a historic building, design elements such as scale, massing, height, level of ornament, and exterior materials should draw from the architectural vocabulary of surrounding buildings. Water Street benefits from a consistency in all of these architectural aspects, and that consistency should be reflected in the new design.

The proposed project will result in two actions that, even considered individually, would have adverse impacts on the Warren Waterfront Historic District. They result in the permanent loss of a part of the district's history and the imposition of an incongruous replacement. Rather than demolishing two historic buildings and constructing a building that is out of place with its surroundings, every effort should be made to rehabilitate the existing buildings and retain the character of Water Street and the district.

If you have any questions, please contact me at [jeffrey.emidy@preservation.ri.gov](mailto:jeffrey.emidy@preservation.ri.gov) or 222-4134.

Sincerely,



Jeffrey D. Emidy  
Interim Executive Director  
Interim State Historic Preservation Officer

C: Maya Gamon, Secretary, Town of Warren, by email  
Valerie Talmage, Preserve Rhode Island, by email