

Preserving a Neighborhood's Essential Character Is Not Giving It Special Treatment

By Larry Spector

"A half truth is a whole lie." Instead of just delighting in sarcasm ["When Did Society Hill Become A City State Unto Itself?" November 21, 2019] to claim that Society Hill gets "special treatment" on bike lane and zoning regulations, Inga Saffron should have heeded this proverb. These matters raise serious issues on which reasonable minds can differ, but everyone should at least start with a full set of facts.

Society Hill was hardly insisting on "special treatment" or threatening to go "nuclear" about plastic delineator posts when it commissioned a study from a nationally recognized bike and traffic safety engineering firm which concluded that they are not recommended for Spruce and Pine in Society Hill; or when it reached out to the Bicycle Coalition and OTIS to try to reach common ground on possible alternative intersection safety protections; or when it said that, unlike segments of Spruce and Pine further west, the segments in Society Hill carry SEPTA buses, tour buses and horse carriages that calm traffic and intrude on the same space that would be used for the posts; or when it showed that even before the bike lanes switched to the left side and were painted a luminous green extending through the intersections, the low speeds and low traffic counts of those segments in Society Hill made them much safer than 300 other streets in Philadelphia.

On zoning matters Society Hill does not seek special treatment. Like every other neighborhood in this "city of neighborhoods," it simply does not want its unique characteristics ignored with one-size-fits-all zoning regulation.

A 65-foot height limit on Walnut between Second and Fourth Streets is supported by preservation advocates and the adjacent Independence National Historic Park, because preserving that gentle transition is more important than dwarfing the magnificent Merchants Exchange Building with what would be the 9th high-rise residential tower in tiny Society Hill. And contrary to Ms. Saffron's assumption, the new overlay would not limit the redevelopment of the Positano restaurant parcel, which the Code already limits more restrictively.

The historic preservation bills passed recently to discourage demolition of historic properties could only backfire in Society Hill, because its historic properties are already designated and therefore protected. No one should want cherished colonial style homes used to support antenna towers, fraternity houses and medical marijuana dispensaries that would be permitted as of right absent our proposed overlay.

In 2008 the American Planning Association designated Society Hill as one of its Great Places in America, describing the neighborhood as "dense, fine-grained, and walkable – and a model for sustainable urban living in the present." If that model is to be served by historic preservation, then Society Hill's proposed legislation calls for enthusiastic support, not sarcastic half-truths.

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