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Tri-Met agrees to spare the Figo House

Posted by [Mike Francis](#) February 13, 2008 10:33AM



Thomas Boyd / The Oregonian

The Figo House, 525 SW Jackson St., Portland

Not too long ago, I/we wrote an editorial with the headline "Leave the House Alone." (You can read it after the jump.) It was about a scheme cooked up by TriMet, in conjunction with Portland State University, to acquire a 104-year-old Victorian house that stood in the way of its construction plans, even though it had publicly denied any effort to do so.

The news last week was good: [In the face of public pressure and resistance from owner Randal Acker, TriMet decided it wouldn't try to knock down the Figo House.](#) But before closing the chapter on this unsavory land grab, it's worth reprinting a few of the internal emails that TriMet officials exchanged on the

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subject, while publicly denying their intentions. The emails were unearthed by Acker, who acquired them under public records requests.

From Jillian Detweiler, TriMet's land development planner, on Jan. 9, 2007, to a colleague:

"...Amending the project to include joint development of the College/Jackson block will require approval to take this historic property. We will have to make the case that there is no reasonable alternative. While I think the case can be made, it puts an important decision in the hands of the relatively unreliable State Historic Preservation Officer..."

From David Unsworth, TriMet's manager of project development, on May 18, 2006, to a colleague:

"I think that we need to develop a solid description of why we are taking the block and why we are affecting the historic resource. Next, we should have a quiet conversation with the (State Historic Preservation Officer), then we need to approach (the Federal Transit Administration.)"

Leave the house alone
Monday, January 07, 2008

On the gritty southern edge of the transit mall, where Interstate 405 dumps commuters into downtown, stands a lonely vestige of old Portland, the Figo House (named after the owner's dog.)

It's a well-kept example of the Victorian architecture that has almost vanished from the central city. Unlike the last few remaining old houses downtown, such as the lovely but vacant Italianate Morris Marks House on Southwest 12th Avenue, the 1894 Figo house is in good repair and fully occupied, housing the legal practice of owner Randal Acker.

But TriMet thinks it's in the way.

The house at 525 S.W. Jackson Street stands on a rather nondescript block owned partly by TriMet and partly by Portland State University, both of which envision a full-block redevelopment project that will incorporate student housing, classrooms, a light-rail station and a TriMet employee break room. Much of the surrounding area has been cleared, as Tri-Met acquired various properties and tore them down to make way for the tracks. The Figo House is so isolated by construction work now, it's hard even to reach Acker's office.

It is charming to think that, when the work is done, the Figo House would again be accessible and situated by a busy light-rail station and the state's largest university. But, of course, the transit agency doesn't see it that way. It wants to strip the block of its last shred of historical context and rebuild it to fit its vision of what a transit mall ought to be. And a privately owned law office in a historic house, apparently, isn't included in that vision.

Acker hasn't gotten an offer from TriMet and says he has no intention of leaving the house anyway. But later this month, the agency will unveil a set of options for the block that include the forced acquisition of the Figo House. (Other options will include relocating it or doing nothing.)

Acker is furious at the way the transit agency has proceeded quietly to plot the removal of his house, even after a 2004 environmental impact statement concluded that the transit work would have minimal impact on his property. At the same time, the State Historic Preservation Office agreed that the house shouldn't be disturbed by the transit project without some undefined measures, such as relocation, to mitigate the changes. But TriMet says subsequent revisions to the light-rail route have put the Figo House in the way. Acker says TriMet's consultant, San Francisco-based URS Corp., told him the State Historic Preservation Office can't stop the agency from condemning his house.

In legal terms, that's true, it can't. But TriMet should not view the city as a mass-transit theme park that can't accommodate dissonant uses, especially one as historically significant and currently vibrant as the Figo House. The house is in fine condition, and its owner doesn't want to sell. In 2004, the transit agency led him to believe he wouldn't have to. That ought to be the final word on the matter.

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