

**From:** Michael Wells [mailto:michael@grantsnorthwest.com]  
**Sent:** Friday, July 25, 2014 11:20 AM  
**To:** Planning and Sustainability Commission  
**Subject:** Comprehensive Plan Testimony

To the Planning and Sustainability Committee,

I live in Willamette Heights about a half block from the historic Montague house that was nearly demolished last month. Like many people, I became aware of how little protection there is for houses, and for neighborhoods, from having an existing house demolished. In the case in our neighborhood, there was no required notification of neighbors and because the owner filed building plans with the demolition permit, it was awarded the same day.

I realize that Portland will continue to attract more people and there will be more housing growth, including in-fill on vacant lots. There have been seven new houses built within a block of us in the last decade. Some were on totally vacant lots, some on what had been side yards to existing houses. I have no objection to these, and our neighborhood has welcomed the newcomers in these homes.

But I disagree with the idea that we just need to accept demolition of perfectly good houses and degradation of neighborhoods. Portland can, and should, have policies to protect existing houses. It's crazy that the City of Portland requires more neighborhood involvement and process when somebody wants to build a chicken coop in their back yard or cut down a tree than it does when the plan is to demolish a beautiful old home. A week after the scheduled demolition, which required no notice, we got a letter from the city that a neighbor one street away wants to build a new garage and there's a comment period. This will have little impact on us, or the neighborhood as a whole, but there's a formal process.

According to The Architectural Heritage Center, an estimated 389 demolitions took place in 2013 in neighborhoods across the city; it's rumored that a-demo-per-work-day is happening in 2014. They have some ideas as places to start responding to the demolition epidemic:

(1) Require advance notice to surrounding property owners and residents. Right now, notice is only required by the city when more than one new house is proposed. There's no notice/delay when a demo application and the replacement house permit are filed the same day. The city should require notice, and time for response, across the board.

(2) Change the definition of "demolition" in the city's development code – a big problem is that any demolition that leaves any portion of a house still standing (such as a partial foundation wall) is called an "alteration" or "remodel", not a demolition (which are seriously under-counted, as a result.) More typically, many other jurisdictions use "*at least 50% of a structure remains standing*" as the primary criteria for an alteration/remodel. If that's reasonable enough for other cities and counties, it should be acceptable for Portland.

(3) Houses that are obviously historic (but unprotected) are those that have long been listed on the city's 1983 *Historic Resources Inventory*, but many houses have reached the age of 50+ since then. We propose a mandatory 120 day delay for houses on the HRI or at least 50+ years old. These are likely the ones that need time for investigating alternatives to demolition.

(4) Require that existing front and side yard setbacks be maintained for the new house(s) - One major concern is that after a demolition, a new house is not only usually bigger, but it covers much more of the lot, often changing the streetscape substantially. If the front and side-yard setbacks stay the same for the new house, the streetscape remains more like its traditional neighbors.

(I've shortened this for space. See their proposals at <http://portlandpreservation.wordpress.com>)

The Architectural Heritage Center has a historic focus. There are certainly other ideas and approaches. Portland needs to create policies to preserve existing housing and neighborhoods, while we welcome newcomers to new and existing houses without destroying the quality of life that attracts them, and us, to Portland.

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