

## \$45M arts center on Detroit-Grosse Pointe Park border gets a needed approval — with conditions

By Sherri Welch

A \$45 million arts center planned for the border of Grosse Pointe Park and Detroit has taken a step forward after months-long standstill.

During a meeting Wednesday, the Detroit Historic District Commission said plans to put a parking lot for staff, artists and patrons of the developing Schaap Center in Grosse Pointe Park obviously do not comport with the historic Jefferson-Chalmers Historic Business District. But with a half-demolished building on the site, the commissioners unanimously approved two notices to proceed.

Their approval came in spite of concerns about issues including storm water runoff in an area of heavy flooding in 2021, minimal community engagement on the project and the back of the developing Schaap Center facing Detroit, things the commission will look to the city's planning department to address.

The HDC issued developer Urban Renewal Initiative Foundation a notice to proceed with demolition of the western portions of build-



A rendering of the planned \$45 million A. Paul and Carol C. Schaap Center for the Performing Arts.

ings on 14927 E. Jefferson Ave., noting that leaving a half-demolished building on the site is not in the best interests of the community.

It also issued a notice to proceed on the developer's plan to put a parking lot on the site — with conditions.

The developer will have to secure all required planning and zoning approvals. The historic commission is also requiring Urban Renewal to double the size of a small gathering area it proposed as part of the lot at the corner of Jefferson Avenue and Alter Road, ensure it has seating and appropriate lighting and is connected to the Schaap Center. And

that area must include recognition of some sort of the significance of the buildings that once stood in the area, including the historic Deck Bar, a building that Grosse Pointe Park owned and demolished.

The approvals came after several audience members spoke out for and against the project and the benefit it would bring to Detroiters and after Commissioner James Hamilton questioned whether perhaps denying the application would enable future development of a bar/restaurant that might benefit from the increased traffic along the corridor tied to the Schaap Center.

A representative for Urban Renewal pointed out that a memorandum of understanding between Grosse Pointe Park and former Detroit Planning Director Maurice Cox to allow the developer to put a parking lot on the area was a binding contract.

That prompted HDC Chairwoman Tiffany Hill to ask the city's legal department to issue a brief about the legality of that memorandum being signed without the Historic District Commission being included.

In development for several years, the project was halted in late March when the city of Detroit issued a stop work order on the demolition clearing a path for a parking area that is part of a plan for the A. Paul and Carol C. Schaap Center for the Performing Arts, the same day it began.

By the time the order was issued, the northernmost building — which has a Grosse Pointe Park address and secured a permit from that city, according to Urban Renewal Initiative Foundation — was nearly demolished.

The city of Detroit in April filed a lawsuit against Urban Renewal Initiative Foundation for beginning demolition on the property, which sits in both cities, without required Detroit approvals.

In the suit filed in Wayne Coun-



Credit: Urban Renewal Initiative Foundation

**The city of Detroit issued a stop work order on demolition work happening at the city's eastern border with Grosse Pointe Park in late March after the project began without its approval, demolishing one of the two-story buildings near the center of this view. The corner, white building still stands while work to pave the way for parking for the \$45 million A. Paul and Carol C. Schaap Center for the performing arts is stopped.**

ty Circuit Court, the city asked the court to compel Urban Renewal Initiative Foundation to seek required approvals and permitting from Detroit for the property within its borders on Jefferson Avenue east of Alter Road, to pay unspecified fines for violating city code and to pay the costs to restore or replicate the structure it says was unlawfully demolished. That case is ongoing.

Overall, Wednesday night's HDC outcome was a very good step forward for the project and for the east side, said Jaime Rae Turnbull, interim executive director of Urban Renewal.

"I thought there was a great deal of respect shown to the process by

HDC, (and) I credit HDC staff for the very thorough staff report on a sensitive subject," she said, referring to years-long tensions between the two cities.

"We have the opportunity to work with Antoine Bryant at (the Detroit) Planning and Development Department and his team to collaborate, make design improvements and get it right," being thoughtful about the good and bad feedback on the project, Turnbull said.

"We are on the cusp of transformational change that heals the past and invests in the future. And this project stands to be the catalyst for that change."