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Historical Society Loses Round in Fight to Renovate a Landmark

By GLENN COLLINS
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In a stormy two-hour meeting before 200 neighborhood residents last night, the New-York Historical Society was rebuffed by Community Board 7 in Manhattan, which resoundingly opposed the group's proposal to renovate the exterior of its landmark building at 170 Central Park West.

The board voted 40 to 2 against a plan that would replace the society's eight-foot-wide doorway, built in 1908, with a 40-foot glass entryway and granite portico at the main entrance between West 76th and 77th Streets.

Because the board is an advisory body, its decision does not block the renovation. But as a signal of strong community opposition, the vote could carry weight with the New York City Planning Commission and the Landmarks Preservation Commission, which is likely to hold a hearing on the plan this month. Both groups have veto power over the project.

Louise Mirrer, the historical society's president, said the community board inappropriately linked the renovation plan to the construction of a 23-story luxury residential tower that the society has proposed as an addition to its four-story building.

"I'm disappointed," Dr. Mirrer said, adding that the community board's vote, if used as a precedent, "would prevent any landmark anywhere from ever doing anything new."

Kate Wood, executive director of Landmark West, an Upper West Side preservation group, said that the historical society's project "deserves to be stopped in its tracks." She described it as "a Trojan horse" for the luxury tower and added, "Please don't open the gate."

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Scott M. Stringer, the Manhattan borough president, said he could not take a position for or against the plan. "But we should call it what it is," he said. "It's going to be a large tower. It's not about phase one tonight -- it's about what comes after the facade."

Dr. Mirrer argued that the renovation is essential to make the building more inviting and its exhibitions more accessible, and, she added, that it might be years before a tower could be approved. But Peter M. Wright, co-chairman of the Park West 77th Street Block Association, termed the design "an ill-conceived facade." The tower, he said, would intrude upon the Central Park skyline and cast a shadow on the park itself.

"I'm pleased," Mr. Wright said of the vote, adding that it was a step toward defeating the tower plan.

For weeks, preservation groups that oppose the renovation had been e-mailing their members to attend the meeting, held in an auditorium at the American Bible Society at West 61st Street and Broadway. The society, meanwhile, had been exhorting its members to lobby elected city officials to support the plan.

The debate -- which followed an hour of discussion on other projects -- was punctuated with catcalls and applause. The society's plan proposes changes not only to the Central Park West entrance, it also would de-emphasize the West 77th Street entrance and reconfigure existing windows there for the construction of a cafe.

The opposition of the community board "bears the hallmark of a group that has campaigned against the historical society," Dr. Mirrer said. "Of course we will press on."