

March 19, 2007

Hon. Robert B. Tierney
Chair
New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission
1 Centre Street, 9th Floor
New York, New York 10007

Dear Chairman Tierney:

Although I'm not attending the public hearing on Tuesday, March 20, concerning the New-York Historical Society's latest proposal to alter their landmark on Central Park West between 76th and 77th Streets, I would like to offer some history of my own for your consideration.

I served as the City Council member for the 6th District from 1989 to 2001. During this time, the Historical Society embarked on a major renovation project for their landmark that ultimately resulted in positive, appropriate changes to the building, including improved mechanical systems and a well-designed handicap ramp on West 77th Street. However, from a public review standpoint, the project got off to a rocky start, as Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messinger, State Senators Fred Ohrenstein and Franz Leichter, State Assemblymember (now Manhattan Borough President) Scott Stringer, Community Board 7 Chair Elizabeth Starkey and I pointed out in a letter dated March 14, 1994. We felt strongly that the New-York Historical Society's "complete lack of communication" with the public called their entire project into question. We wrote:

"... If the [N-YHS] Board decides to move ahead with this decision without any public comment our future commitment to the Society will be in jeopardy." And we went on to say, "We hope you reconsider the manner in which you are managing the Society and take steps to address the serious breach of trust that has resulted from your management."

Unfortunately, the Society has once again aroused the distrust of the community and the community board by announcing plans to develop a residential tower in the future but submitting a façade-only application at this time. A proposed 280-foot tower will have an undeniable impact on the landmark itself, the two overlapping historic districts it is in, as well as Central Park and the Avenue. I understand that the society has publicly stated that they will work with the community during the design stage of the proposed additions but the community distrust is rampant.

The success of this institution depends on the public's interest and good will and I believe that there is more its Board and administrators can do to win the confidence of the community before it proceeds with any changes. Surely they should be able to overcome the community resistance with some rational discussions and a more open response that would insure fairness and transparency. This would be to the society's advantage as well as the Landmarks Commission because without such a process their next application will in all likelihood incur a heightened anger and resistance from the community and entail innumerable delays, possible litigation and increased costs. I believe that the Commission can play a very positive role in this controversy by exerting its powerful influence to insist that the Society meet the community's need to know the future and ensure their positive role in the future plans.

Sincerely,

Ronnie Eldridge