

**From:** [Sam McDonald](#)  
**To:** [Ebinger, Matthew J. - PDR](#)  
**Subject:** 1201 Porter Spot Blight Comments for Planning Commission Meeting May 4 at 1:30pm  
**Date:** Monday, May 4, 2020 1:33:19 AM  
**Attachments:** [1201 Porter Street and Spot Blight.msg](#)

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Matthew:

Please confirm receipt of this email.

Planning Commission Chairman and Planning Commission Members:

I am Sam McDonald, a developer of historic rehabs and new construction projects in the City of Richmond for over 20 years, the owner of a development and property management business based in Manchester, and a resident of the home we built next door to the subject property.

I support the inclusion of 1201 Porter in the spot blight abatement program. The property endangers the public's health, safety, and welfare because the structure is dilapidated, deteriorated, and violates minimum health and safety standards.

There are three things you may not be aware of that I would like for you to know about this property:

1. The building is in worse shape than you may realize.
  - a. The notice sent out for this meeting does not include the language describing significant structural concerns from the City's own inspectors. These notices state that failure to comply may result in demolition by the City and a lien for City demo cost. The most recent of these were sent on November 7, 2017, December 5, 2018, and March 13, 2019. These are in addition to the many notices sent regarding the structure being open and vacant.

The language in these frequent notices from the City inspectors, that is actually missing from the notice for this meeting under specifications of blight, includes: "this structure has been deemed hazardous due to the many damaged, missing and rotten and compromised internal framing and support elements (floor joists and wall studs). Much of the load bearing support at the center of the structure has been removed and the temporary support appears to be insufficient and

incorrectly installed for the imposed load. The opening at the rear of the second floor and the damage to the rear roof are allowing the weather elements to enter the structure which will further deteriorate the remaining framing components.” This language is the same for each of these notices over the past 3 years. That means that the owner has not corrected these deficiencies despite the number of notices received, permits pulled, and promises previously made to correct the deficiencies, including his most recent structural plan and permit work.

- b. Even today, after all the notices, the previous plans and permit, and the recent proposed plan to comply submitted after the March meeting, in addition to ignoring the City’s notices to correct deficiencies, the owner has not taken any steps to correct the low-hanging fruit including uncovered openings on the structure, bricks continuing to fall off and onto neighboring properties, and a roof system that is collapsing and causing further strain on a compromised structure. Please see the recent photos attached.

2. The owner is not a Senior Citizen owner-occupant who just needs time to paint his trim.

- a. This owner is an out-of-state developer who owns other City properties and understands how the system works.
- b. He has done the bare minimum on this property over and over to game the system upon receipt of City violation notices in order to kick the can down the road. These minimal actions do not stop deterioration of the structure. An example are the braces installed at the front exterior to make believe that they will prevent the structure from collapsing. The bolts for these braces were “epoxied” into the brick with Elmer’s wood glue. I watched as the owner’s brother installed them the day the last active building permit was to expire and an inspection was needed to show that the owner complied with his last stabilization plan. A recent picture of the brace separated from the wall it is supposed to support is attached.

3. The City continues to fall for a promise from an owner who has never complied at the expense of residents who do.

- a. The owner has obtained permits and convinced the previous Building Commissioner that he would improve the property, but has not done substantial work to put the property back into productive use, despite chance after chance.
- b. This action was continued from March because the owner’s brother showed up in person minutes before the Planning Commission meeting and promised a new plan of action. The Planning Commission action to place the property into the spot blight program should not have been continued based on the multiple previous proper legal notices, non-response, and non-compliance by the owner. The pattern of issuing official notices and then the City ignoring them undermines the entire process. This moving line-in-the-sand should stop immediately for the benefit of the

community.

- c. This inaction insults the intelligence of the nearby residents, property owners, and developers who have worked relentlessly over the years to make the City of Richmond a better place to live by following the rules. This property is the most derelict structure in the Manchester neighborhood. Manchester neighbors deserve better, and those who have approached me in the neighborhood wonder how our City can allow this to go unaddressed when others make so much investment to better the neighborhood that they choose to live in.

Lastly, I attached an email I sent to Chairman Poole right after the March Planning Commission meeting regarding his comment about Historic Richmond asking to change the spot blight wording on this property to preclude demolition. In speaking with Cyane Crump of Historic Richmond afterward, she agrees with the position that no one yet knows if the structure can be saved, so it is unfair to eliminate demolition as a last resort in case the structure cannot ultimately be saved. Robin Miller also shared the same sentiment with me, "agreeing 100%" that demolition may be necessary depending on the structural condition, after he was approached by Historic Richmond on the possibility of demolition of this structure.

Please take the proper action for the City of Richmond and its residents by designating 1201 Porter Street as a blighted property and adopt a spot blight abatement program to take ownership and eventually put this property into the hands of someone who will gladly complete the task of making it a neighborhood asset.

Thank you,

C. Samuel McDonald  
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**From:** [Sam McDonald](#)  
**To:** [Rodney@thewiltonco.com](mailto:Rodney@thewiltonco.com)  
**Cc:** [Robertson, Ellen F. - City Council](#); [Olinger, Mark A. - PDR](#)  
**Subject:** 1201 Porter Street and Spot Blight

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Chairman Poole:

I was at the beginning of the Planning Commission meeting today when I heard you advocate for the removal of the demolition option for the 1201 Porter property as Historic Richmond recently requested. While I support the fantastic work Historic Richmond does, I do not agree with their request to eliminate the demolition option in this specific case. Based on past actions of the current owner, I am disappointed that this case was continued.

As you may know, I have made a career out of saving historic properties in downtown Richmond through the historic tax credit program. Many of these properties were very high problem rehabs that others chose not to tackle, including the Power Plant at Lucky Strike, the Enders Warehouse in Shockoe Bottom, Emrick Flats, the attached homes at Marshall and Adams, and the Crump Double House. I worked with Charles Macfarlane to restore and update the Adam Craig House. I have continued on historic rehabs in Jackson Ward and Manchester. I strongly believe that the 1201 Porter house should be saved and rehabbed as well.

The problem is that removing the ability to demolish the house freezes the property in perpetual deterioration, or certain eventual collapse, if for some reason it cannot be structurally saved. The City staff report that was summarized in the notice for the Spot Blight hearing left out some of the most significant structural points from the City's own inspector's report, which was noticed to the property owner on multiple occasions (at least on November, 2017, December, 2018, and March, 2019). That wording, from the most recent notice sent on March 13, 2019, states:

**“This structure has been deemed hazardous due to the many damaged, missing and rotten and compromised internal framing and support elements (floor joists and wall studs). Much of the load bearing support at the center of the structure has been removed and the temporary support appears to be insufficient and incorrectly installed for the imposed load. The opening at the rear of the second floor and the damage to the rear roof are allowing the weather elements to enter the structure which will further deteriorate the remaining framing components.”**

This description has not been updated since it was first used in the November 2017 notice to the owner, but as a neighbor, I assure you that the structure has deteriorated further. In the summer of 2018 the owner had a permit to do structural stabilization, and I watched him remove the remaining second floor structure, cutting out historic material one dumpster load

at a time and causing further strain on the exterior walls. A large section of the roof is now concave and holds huge amounts of water until it leaks away. The “braces” at the front of the structure are for show only. I talked to the owner’s brother as he epoxied anchor bolts into the masonry with Elmer’s wood glue the day his permit was expiring and he needed an inspection to extend it. Once extended, the owner did not do another day’s work on the house.

This is not a Senior citizen resident who can’t afford to repair their porch. It is an out-of-state, absentee owner who is waiting out the market at the expense of those who make this neighborhood home. There have been plenty of chances for him to do the right thing, and he has repeatedly decided not to.

The house could fall down tomorrow, or in a month, or after it is purchased through Spot Blight but before work starts. You stated today that you believed this was the first time the City has heard from the owner. Doug Murrow actually met with this owner, who convinced Murrow with another action plan that he would stabilize the property in 2017/early 2018, thus delaying yet another round of notice cycles and City threats.

I don’t know that Historic Richmond has had a structural engineer examine the property, which a purchaser would certainly do at the earliest opportunity to determine if the structure is able to be saved. If we don’t know that it physically can be saved, how can you make that the only option? Removing the demolition option ties the hand of a buyer to a fate they may not be able to control for physics and financial reasons.

As the wording of the ordinance stands now, Historic Richmond can elect to be the highest bidder and then can save the house through means that have little to do with the financial viability of the project, and through which maybe no other buyer could afford. If they are not the highest bidder, the prevailing bidder should not have the restriction to preserve the house at a cost that exceeds the economic benefit just because a competing prospective buyer requested it.

To reiterate: I want to see it saved and would attempt to do so if I am the winning bidder. If my experts say it cannot be done, I need to have an option that allows me to possibly save the main façade or replace the house with a respectful option of similar size and feel to complete the block, which is one of the nicest on Porter Street, in my humble opinion.

Please don’t change the wording and don’t continue to move the line in the sand.

Sincerely,  
Sam McDonald

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