

Proposal is appropriate for Breakers

More than 10 years ago, the Preservation Society of Newport County put up a large green-and-white ticket tent near the entrance to The Breakers mansion, over the objections of some neighbors who said it didn't fit in with its historic surroundings.

Turns out, they were right. Now the Preservation Society is proposing to do something about it.

Earlier this spring, the society unveiled plans to construct a permanent welcome center on the grounds of The Breakers — its most visited property and the fourth most-visited museum in New England, drawing 400,000 people a year.

The center, with designs that draw from Gilded Age greenhouses and conservatories, would be situated in an existing grove of trees, with additional landscaping to shield it from view. Its roof would be made of pre-patinated copper shingles, the green hue of which would further blend in with the landscape.

That it would be so well hidden almost is a shame, because the architectural renderings show a subtle, stylish structure that most venues would be proud to put on display.

But it certainly addresses concerns of some neighbors, who worry that the center would detract from its historic surroundings (sound familiar?).

In fact, the proposed welcome center would enhance its surroundings compared to what exists today, as would a second phase of the project to restore the serpentine path along the property created by noted landscape engineer Ernest Bowditch.

"This is really special," Trudy Coxé, executive director of the Preservation Society, said of the experience of visiting The Breakers.

And the amenities that greet visitors — including restrooms and waiting and ticketing areas — should be special, too.

That is far from the case, however. In addition to the aforementioned tent, there is a separate small ticket booth, snack shed and portable toilets. Yes, porta-potties greet visitors to the most opulent of the Newport mansions, prompting one to compare it to "a shantytown."

Architect Alan Joslin calls the welcome center "the portal to the experience of the Preservation Society." Even though the ticket tent has served its purpose — increasing sales to other society properties, revenue and membership — that portal is not up to snuff.

It would be transformed into an experience befitting the estate — designed by Richard Morris Hunt in 1893 for Cornelius Vanderbilt II — if the plans are approved.

After lengthy review by a committee and the full board, exploring various options and listening to a host of preliminary concerns and criticisms, the Preservation Society unveiled its plans to a group of hospitality industry leaders and elected officials, to a very

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For more information about the Breakers welcome center proposal and to see architectural drawings, visit www.thebreakerswelcomecenter.org.

warm reception. Before that, the society started meeting with small groups of donors and detractors alike.

We are glad the society is taking suggestions and concerns into consideration. After all, The Breakers is a vital community asset.

We respect the opinions of critics, including the Bellevue Avenue Ochre Point Neighborhood Association, which began airing its concerns late last year. We asked the co-chairmen of the association to meet with the editorial board to discuss those concerns, but they did not take us up on the offer.

Instead, the neighborhood association sent us a report by a preservation landscape architectural and planning firm it had hired to study the proposal. That firm recommended building the visitors center "outside of the property fence line so that an authentic Vanderbilt landscape" — based on what was there in the late 1800s — "can be restored and presented at this museum property." This week, the association's board voted to accept the conclusions of the report.

It is an interesting approach, but what happens inside of the property fence line of a privately owned property would seem to be beyond the scope of a neighborhood association, unless it has to do with noise, traffic, sightline or other quality-of-life issues. The question of whether the welcome center as proposed is appropriate for the site should be determined by the agencies that have such jurisdiction, including the Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission — which has an easement on the property — which is scheduled to review the proposal on Wednesday.

The city's Historic District Commission, Planning Board and Zoning Board of Review also would have to approve the plan before it could move forward. The Historic District Commission is expected to take up the proposal in July.

Although it seems as though just about everything the Preservation Society proposes, particularly at The Breakers, meets with some opposition, the organization has a track record of doing the right things in the right way to grow its business, which forms the backbone of Newport's tourism industry.

This project is no different. In fact, we hope it will set a positive precedent for visitor amenities for other attractions in the city.