

OUR VIEW

# Breakers plan wins vindication

# OPINION

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The Newport Zoning Board of Review's decision to clear the way for a proposed welcome center at The Breakers was not just a victory for the Preservation Society of Newport County. It is a victory for Newport itself.

The \$4.2 million, 3,650-square-foot welcome center has been carefully designed to blend in with its surroundings, situated in a grove of trees, so it does not detract from the majestic Breakers estate. Inside, the one-story, pavilion-style building will offer high-tech and accessible amenities including ticket sales, information about the society's other attractions, restrooms and a "servery" where pre-packaged sandwiches, snacks and beverages can be purchased.

These are the kinds of amenities visitors to historic sites around the world are accustomed to — not the temporary tent, ticket shack and portable toilets that now greet them at The Breakers.

The Breakers draws more than 400,000 visitors a year to Newport, which makes it the Preservation Society's most-visited property — and the fourth most-visited museum in New England, surpassed only by three major attractions in Boston.

Welcoming more visitors to the Preservation Society's properties will aid the nonprofit organization's mission to maintain its historic estates, which are a major driver of Newport's tourism industry. Any effort to improve the visitor experience at The Breakers will, in turn, benefit the city itself.

But the issue the Zoning Board was tasked with deciding was whether the welcome center, as proposed, was appropriate for The Breakers property. The Historic District Commission, in a 4-3 vote in August, decided it was not and rejected the application. The Preservation Society appealed to the Zoning Board, which voted 4-1 on Jan. 27 to overturn the HDC's decision.

In doing so, Zoning Board Vice Chairwoman Lynn Ceglie eloquently stated the facts — and pointed out the errors in the HDC's decision-making process. That included not allowing the report of the state Historical Preservation and Heritage Commission, which had approved the welcome center plan, to be entered into the HDC record, and applying incorrect standards to the application.

In addition, the Bellevue Ochre Point Neighborhood Association, which opposes the proposal, presented one expert witness, a landscape architect who "admitted to having not building design credentials," Ceglie said. "Landscaping" and "historic designed landscapes" are exempt from HDC review by city ordinance, she pointed out.

"I find that the HDC decision is based on prejudicial procedural error, clear error, and is

## TO OUR READERS

Daily News Publisher William F. Lucey III, a member of the editorial board, is a member of the board of trustees of the Preservation Society of Newport County. The Daily News is one of three Partners in Preservation, the highest level of corporate support for the Preservation Society's work.

not supported by the weight of the evidence in the record," said Ceglie, acting chairwoman for the appeal hearings.

City Solicitor Joseph J. Nicholson Jr. told the board that based on the grounds members gave for their vote, he believes the city now will issue the Preservation Society a "certificate of appropriateness" to construct the welcome center at The Breakers.

The fact board members gave grounds for their votes stands in stark contrast to the vote taken by the HDC — after hearing hours of testimony on three separate nights — with no explanation from members, except for comment by HDC Chairman John Shehan, including his assertion that it was the intention of Cornelius Vanderbilt, who built The Breakers between 1893 and 1895, and his landscape architect Ernest Bowditch not to have any buildings on the grounds except the mansion, the caretaker's cottage and the children's playhouse.

"How would we know what the intention of Mr. Vanderbilt would be in 2014, especially now that The Breakers is no longer a private residence but an attraction visited by hundreds of thousands of tourists every year?" Ceglie asked last week. "We don't know his intention unless seances are involved. As a businessman, he might have favored a visitors center."

She is right on. The proposal is about the future of the property as a highly successful visitor attraction in the historic city of Newport. It is critical that the welcome center be appropriate for the site, and this proposal clearly is, as the decisions of the statewide commission and city's Zoning Board attest.

The neighborhood association could appeal the decision to Superior Court. But for now, we applaud the Zoning Board for clearing the way for The Breakers welcome center to be built — clearing the air on a very important project for Newport.