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Give The Breakers a break

In a nonsensical decision that would hurt Newport as a magnificent center for tourism and architecture, the city's Historic District Commission has rejected the beautiful welcome center for The Breakers mansion proposed by the Preservation Society of Newport County.

This shaky ruling should be challenged on appeal to the Zoning Board. Still, it is a shame that the commission has meanly forced the society, which does wonderful work preserving the beauty of Newport, to spend more money on legal bills.

The argument against the welcome center was preposterous. "For 118 years" — since the Breakers was completed in 1895 — "no new structures have been built at The Breakers," said Turner Scott, the lawyer representing the lead opponent to the visitors center, the Bellevue Ochre Point Neighborhood Association. HDC chairman John Shehan added that, "in my opinion," Cornelius Vanderbilt II, who built it, and his designers did not intend that any buildings other than the mansion, the gatehouse and the children's cottage that exist today would be built on the grounds.

This is absurd, because Vanderbilt and his designers created The Breakers to be a private home, not what it is today: a magnificent house visited each year by thousands of tourists from around the

world. Its changed purpose argues for an unobtrusive accommodation to those crowds — something Vanderbilt certainly would have understood, as one of the Gilded Age's most pragmatic men.

The opponents have a damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don't attitude toward the welcome center. The Preservation Society, for example, took painstaking care to have its architects design a structure that would blend into the landscape and incorporate lovely style elements of the 19th century. But Mr. Scott asserts the design is flawed because it would be a "false historic presence" — in other words, it fits in *too well* with The Breakers!

The opponents urged that the grounds be restored to their original state, a costly and challenging project for a landscape that changed radically during its initial decades. And they argued that the welcome center itself be built on part of the Breakers parking lot across Ochre Point Avenue. But losing those parking spaces would only increase the pressure of parking and traffic on the streets of the neighborhood.

The Zoning Board should overturn the HDC's decision and let the Preservation Society build the tasteful welcome center to replace the existing tent and outhouse, which everyone with a shred of common sense agrees are unworthy of The Breakers.