

Testimony submitted to Salem City Council in opposition to demolishing Howard Hall

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July 25, 2014

I'm going to tell two related stories: the tale of how the five large, beautiful, healthy U.S. Bank trees in downtown Salem were cut down in 2013 for no good reason, and the story of how this council may vote to tear down Howard Hall — also for no good reason.

Now, those watching this hearing may not be aware of my tell-all “Outrage” report about the U.S. Bank tree killing debacle. You can read it by going to USBankkillstrees.com Or do a Google search.

In the report I discuss how this shameful episode is a window into how the folks currently running City Hall go about doing the public's business. It isn't a pretty picture. My HinesSight blog, Salem Weekly, CCTV, and KMUZ community radio have reported on what I found.

The Statesman Journal hasn't, even though an interested reporter wrote a story almost three months ago. Higher-ups at the paper have been sitting on the story, which remains unpublished. But the story of no story... that's another story.

There are disturbing parallels between a horribly outrageous decision to cut down the U.S. Bank trees, and how the City may be on the verge of an equally outrageous decision to overturn the Historic Landmarks Commission ruling that saves Howard Hall.

In each case a big-moneyed, powerful corporation wanted to do away with a cherished bit of Salem. U.S. Bank was desperate to cut down five gorgeous trees in the Historic District; Salem Hospital is eager to take a wrecking ball to historic Howard Hall.

In each case ordinary citizens were strongly opposed to what the large corporations wanted. Not a single person, other than U.S. Bank staff, thought the five Japanese Zelkovas should be removed. And it sure seems that many more people are in favor of saving Howard Hall than of demolishing it.

In each case a City citizen committee strongly recommended that the Salem landmark be preserved. The Shade Tree Advisory Committee looked at all the facts and said “prune the trees, don’t cut them down.” The Historic Landmarks Commission made findings of fact and conclusions of law that led to a decision: Howard Hall should be saved and repurposed.

In each case political machinations came into play. Public Works Director Peter Fernandez was all set to order that the trees be pruned, not cut down, until he was contacted by U.S. Bank president Ryan Allbritton — who reminded him of a backroom deal they’d made years before to have the trees removed, before an application to do this was even submitted by the bank as required by law.

With Howard Hall, the City Council didn’t wait for Salem Hospital to file an appeal; the council decided to review the Historic Landmarks Commission decision all on its own — an unseemly action for a supposedly neutral quasi-judicial body.

Cynicism about public officials, elected and appointed, is high. I keep hearing “The fix is in; the city council is going to do whatever Salem Hospital wants.”

Well, councilors, remember that your job isn’t to please a large corporation. It is to honor facts and the law. This is what members of the Historic Landmarks Commission did. I urge you to uphold their decision to save Howard Hall.

— Brian Hines