

Friends of Historic Flemington

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State Historic Preservation Office Reminds Flemington that History Matters

If Flemington's Main Street continues to look anything like it did during the Trial of the Century for the Lindbergh baby kidnapping—its period of greatest historical significance—Hunterdon's County Seat may well have the New Jersey State Historic Preservation Office to thank.

The Historic Preservation Office (HPO) has directly called into question the viability of Jack Cust Jr.'s plan for a high-rise makeover of the most historic part of downtown Flemington by rejecting the "Application for Project Authorization" from Flemington Borough and its designated redeveloper, Mr. Cust's Flemington Center Urban Renewal LLC, stating that the application was "not yet technically and professionally complete and sufficient" and that their recent experience has been that "undertakings of this nature in the past have failed."

HPO cited the need for further documentation and a thorough review of alternatives that would be less destructive to the historic streetscape before it could move forward with its legally mandated project review.

The Historic Preservation Office outlined its findings in a June 6 letter to Flemington Mayor Phil Greiner that pointed out numerous deficiencies in the project application. HPO asked the Borough to provide a copy of its Historic Preservation Master Plan along with any resubmitted application. That plan—initially adopted in 1997 and reaffirmed frequently by the Borough until Mr. Cust enlisted support from elected officials for his massive urban renewal concept in early 2016—calls upon the Borough to "designate, protect and maintain Flemington's most important sites and districts" while also allowing old buildings to meet today's needs by being adapted for a new use. This process has led to the resurgence of historic districts across America during the past half century.

In the letter, HPO asked a series of questions that one would have expected Flemington Borough to ask its redeveloper in light of its goals for the historic downtown as outlined in the Historic Preservation Master Plan. HPO asked for:

- Justification for the "changes to historic configurations," that is, the removal or alteration of important historic structures.
- Assurance that the demolition and excavation of the block won't harm the remaining historic buildings in the district.

- Specifics on how the “new structural systems” will be installed in the partially-retained historic buildings once the existing structural systems are removed.
- Details on how the façade of 90 Main, the historic Hunterdon County Bank Building, will be protected from damage.
- Description of alternatives that would avoid destruction of historic resources.
- Clarification of costs.

The Friends of Historic Flemington, a 501c3 not-for-profit corporation established to protect and celebrate Flemington’s history, has expressed grave concerns about the devastating impact the Cust project would have on the historic downtown. Other preservation groups that have expressed concern about the project include The National Trust for Historic Preservation, Preservation New Jersey, the New Jersey Historical Commission, Flemington Historic Preservation Commission, Hunterdon County Historical Society, Hunterdon County Cultural and Heritage Commission, Hunterdon Land Trust, and Rural Awareness Inc.

Key among the Friends’ concerns are the absence of any demonstration of real estate market viability, a fact that also concerned HPO, which found no evidence to support the claim of “extensive studies concerning the economic viability of the downtown.” As a rule, hotels are only built after proof of market viability is demonstrated—typically by a hotel market study—and none has been provided to Flemington to date for Mr. Cust’s project.

The Friends of Historic Flemington will continue to demand what the Borough should have asked for before signing up for this plan—a credible market study to prove that the project is viable, a traffic study to prove that Borough streets will not be overwhelmed, and a summary of the fiscal impact to show whether Mr. Cust’s project will ever offer any fiscal benefits to Flemington Borough, its residents, and its businesses.

Learn more at www.FriendsofHistoricFlemington.com.

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