

When politics get in the way



Mayor Rahm Emanuel came out in favor of razing the old Prentice hospital two days before a panel's key vote. (Jose M. Osorio, Chicago Tribune / March 25, 2013)

By Cheryl Kent and Ron Grossman

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Long after the bulldozers roll, the fight over old Prentice Women's Hospital might be best remembered for how a process intended to protect Chicago's famed architectural heritage was overrun by politics.

The battle by preservationists to save the Bertrand Goldberg-designed building, which Northwestern University is tearing down and replacing with a medical research facility, was joined by some of the biggest names in architecture, among them Frank Gehry and Jeanne Gang.

The city panel that rejected preliminary landmark status for the building, the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, is intended to be an independent body.

But in this case the process was tightly controlled by Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who came out in favor of tearing down old Prentice two days before a highly orchestrated and irregular vote by the commission. In addition, several commissioners have business relationships with the city that, while not in direct conflict with the old Prentice issue, raise questions that one ethics expert called "troubling."

At its November 2012 meeting, the commission voted to give old Prentice preliminary landmark status, then voted to reverse itself based on a planning report the city acknowledges relied on material provided by Northwestern. Ordinarily such a report would have been only requested at that point, then voted on at a later meeting.

The only commissioner who voted against withdrawing preliminary landmark status — essentially condemning an internationally celebrated structure to the wrecking ball — was Christopher Reed, a historian at Roosevelt University who subsequently quit his post because of how the matter was handled.

"I was disgusted," Reed said. "The process was hijacked by City Hall."

Out with the old

The makeup of the commission underwent a major change shortly after Emanuel took office in May 2011.

Four members, including two architects who wanted a prompt hearing for old Prentice, were not reappointed. That July, Emanuel appointed four new members: an obstetrician, Dr. Anita Blanchard, who delivered Barack and Michelle Obama's daughters; a restaurateur, Tony Hu; and two career politicians, former Ald. Mary Ann Smith and former Cook County Assessor Jim Houlihan.

Not all of those appointees would appear qualified under guidelines established by city ordinance, which say commissioners should be "selected from professionals in the disciplines of history, architecture, historic architecture, planning, archaeology, real estate, historic preservation or related fields." And Emanuel's appointments left the panel without a single architect.

Several commissioners have business connections to City Hall.

Commission Chairman Rafael Leon is executive director of the nonprofit Chicago Metropolitan Housing Development Corp., which has on its board a

member of the Chicago Housing Authority. The development group was started as a body that could issue and refinance bonds for Section 8 housing.

Leon acknowledged that he simply took the recommendation of the city's Department of Housing and Economic Development in voting on old Prentice. "I personally don't know all the details," he said after the November vote. "I need to trust the city's recommendation."

Commissioner Ernest Wong, a landscape architect, had multimillion-dollar contracts with the city. During the course of the old Prentice controversy, his firm, Site Design Group Ltd., received additional contracts for nearly half a million dollars, city records show.

Wong said his business relationship with the city has no influence on his work as a commissioner.

"I wouldn't have voted differently if I were an average citizen," Wong said. "The mayor doesn't award my contracts."

Houlihan is a senior consultant with All-Circo Inc., a lobbying firm where his son, Michael, is a principal. The firm's website notes that it represents "over 25 clients at the city of Chicago, Cook County and state of Illinois," and notes that "Jim Houlihan has forged solid working relationships across all levels of government during his more than 40 years of public service."

Houlihan said he keeps an office at the firm but doesn't draw a salary and is not a registered lobbyist.

Appointed city officials are allowed to work as lobbyists with city agencies as long as those activities are "wholly unrelated" to their public responsibilities, said Steven Berlin, director of the city's Board of Ethics.

Houlihan's firm represents clients in front of the mayor's office and on zoning and building permit matters that come before the Department of Housing and Economic Development, to which the landmarks commission is attached.

The wrong message

David Zarfes, associate dean of the University of Chicago Law School, noted that members of public boards have an ethical responsibility to recuse themselves from any issue where their personal interests even suggest the possibility that their vote might be compromised.

"This is troubling," he said of the old Prentice vote by commissioners with business ties to City Hall "It's tainted. It sends a bad message to the public."

When old Prentice first came before the commission in June 2011, Leon asked that the matter be "deferred to allow for additional time for further discussions between Northwestern University and the city." Later he explained that one reason for the delay was that Emanuel had been in office only a short time when the issue came up.

Yet other than appointing its members, the mayor has no role in commission business, according to the landmark ordinance.

After the old Prentice matter was tabled, Northwestern and preservationists waged a lengthy and expensive public relations battle. Northwestern hired the public relations firm Purple Strategies, based in Alexandria, Va. Its Chicago office was headed by Chris Mather, previously communications director for Emanuel.

The Save Prentice Coalition enlisted high-profile architects from around the world to speak out for saving the building and hired ASGK Public Strategies, a firm founded by political consultant David Axelrod, to help with its case.

After months of silence, a Tribune op-ed piece by Emanuel in favor of demolition appeared online. On the same day, the landmarks commission announced it would consider old Prentice at its November meeting, two days later.

A process that had been stalled for many months went into overdrive. For the first time, a 33-page report prepared by the historic preservation division of the city's Department of Housing and Economic Development, complete with a bibliography citing 47 books and articles, was made public. It concluded that old Prentice met four of seven standards for landmark status — only two are required.

At the same meeting, a planning report was requested of the department and immediately produced by Andrew Mooney, department head. Department spokesman Peter Strazzabosco confirmed the report was prepared in advance of public testimony.

That four-page report supported demolishing old Prentice by endorsing Northwestern's arguments on the economic benefit of a new facility.

Strazzabosco confirmed that all the figures in the report had been provided by Northwestern. Those figures, which pertained to employment, construction benefits, incoming federal grants and more, had not been verified or analyzed by the department before Mooney incorporated them into his report, Strazzabosco confirmed.

The same figures appeared previously and without source attribution in Northwestern's "Finding Tomorrow's Cure," a glossy handout published to support its position advocating demolition.

When told the department report's numbers were lifted from Northwestern without being verified or analyzed by the city, commissioners Leon and Smith both said that knowing that wouldn't have affected their votes. "We believe Northwestern," Leon said.

Commissioners were provided motions — one in favor of landmark status for old Prentice and requesting a planning report, the second accepting and approving the planning report and rescinding landmark status. The first passed 9-0, the second 8-1, with Reed the lone dissent.

Preservationists made a final stand, filing a lawsuit that questioned the procedure for denying old Prentice preliminary landmark status. Though constrained by a higher court ruling from voiding the commission's action, Judge Neil Cohen criticized the "nontransparency" by which old Prentice was dispatched.

In response, the commission took up the matter again in February and, without Reed, obtained unanimous votes on the planning report and a motion to withdraw preliminary landmark status.

Afterward, preservationists dropped their lawsuit, recognizing there was no possibility of saving old Prentice. Christina Morris, Chicago field officer for the National Trust for Historic Preservation, expressed frustration over the process.

"Northwestern's argument and the city's argument was economic, not about the building. It was either/or from the start. Either Prentice is saved or a \$1 billion investment disappears. They never had to prove that assertion," she said.

James Peters, a former director of the city's preservation division, said that in taking away old Prentice's preliminary landmark because of an impact study, the landmarks commissioners utterly failed to discharge their primary responsibility: to consider a structure strictly on its architectural and historical credentials. Landmark status still has to go before the City Council, and with Ald. Brendan Reilly, 42nd, on Northwestern's side, it would have been a done deal either way.

So why did Emanuel force it to play out the way it did? Even without the up and down vote by the landmarks commission, old Prentice likely would be doomed.

Perhaps it's just that in Chicago, bare-knuckle politics is as much an art form as world-class architecture. A century ago, Louis Sullivan, one the city's greatest architects, wondered why Chicago was such an indifferent custodian of its skyline. His career was in decline, his work out of fashion, when he wrote "Kindergarten Chats," a collection of his thoughts on buildings and cities.

"Chicago is young, clumsy, foolish, its architectural sins are unstable, captious and fleeting; it can pull itself down and rebuild itself in a generation, if it will," Sullivan wrote. "As you look out on the dreary murk, this may seem a fantastical dream; perhaps it is — who knows?"

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