



June 29, 2021

Portland City Council  
1221 SW 4th Avenue, Room 110  
Portland, OR 97204

Re: Blanchet House Historic Resource Demolition Review and Adjustment Request  
LU 21-029602 DM AD

Though the historic Yamaguchi Hotel (former Blanchet House) has seen better days, **Restore Oregon strongly opposes its demolition and we fully support the findings of the Bureau of Development Services that recommends denial of the application.**

The importance of this building lies not in its architecture, but in **its rarity** and deep connection to the Japanese American and AAPI (Asian American and Pacific Islander) communities.

Only three historic resources are associated with AAPI cultural heritage in all of Oregon: the Kam Wah Chung State Heritage Site, the Salem Pioneer Cemetery, and Portland's New Chinatown-Japantown Historic District where the Yamaguchi Hotel is located. The number of resources contributing to the District wane along the its northern boundary. The number of vacant lots or "missing teeth" is particularly noticeable, where the Yamaguchi Hotels stands as the gateway. As a result, the Yamaguchi Hotel is essential to the overall integrity of this small, 10-block historic district, which cannot afford to lose another key resource.

The significance of this building has not one, but three, important aspects:

The Yamaguchi Hotel is one of only a handful of buildings still standing in the district that was owned and operated by **Japanese Americans** at a time when people of Asian heritage were ostracized and afforded limited rights, and then lost virtually everything when interned during WWII.

Second, according to the National Register of Historic Places district nomination, Mr. Yamaguchi's wife served as the midwife for the Asian community, and is said to have delivered babies as far away as Hood River. This untold and under-appreciated chapter of Oregon's **women's history** is crucial to preserve for its cultural significance.

Also according to the nomination, the hotel became the Old Ship Zion Seaman's Mission in 1934, placing this building in the service of those in trouble and at risk. Blanchet operated in this location from the early 1960s until 2012. This **social services history**, too, deserves to be recognized and valued.

In addition to the great loss of Japanese American and women's cultural history, granting this application:

1. **Rewards demolition-by-neglect.** A once inhabitable building was allowed by the applicant to become uninhabitable. Notwithstanding the understandable desire of the Blanchet organization to focus on their core mission, they did not, in fact, maintain this building and did not attempt to sell it to someone who could.

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2. **Sets a precedent for more demolitions.** There are many similar examples of demolition-by-neglect going on in the historic district, such as the Wong Laundry Building and New Era Building. Those owners are watching and will almost certainly pursue a similar course of action if this application is successful. And some would be more than happy to forward an application for removal from the National Register because it suits their financial and development goals.
  3. **Undermines the City's own policies.** To approve a demolition permit with no approved replacement – is like saying “Just kidding!” City rules are suggestions. **There's absolutely no guarantee that anything will replace the Yamaguchi Hotel other than another vacant lot.** Once it's gone, it's gone. The applicant should play by the rules when they're proposing to remove such a significant piece of history.
  4. **Abdicates the City's responsibility and role in this predicament.** The City played a significant role in this sad state of affairs. The original deal orchestrated by the PDC (now Prosper Portland) was essentially a property swap – sacrifice the Kiernan Building but save the old Blanchet House. The PDC touted their experience redeveloping historic properties. Then they left Blanchet holding the bag by not executing their option to take ownership of the building after the new Blanchet facility was built. They surely understood the implications of that decision.

Further, when Restore Oregon joined with the Japanese and Chinese American organizations to challenge height increases we feared would incentivize demolition in the district, City Council insisted that would not happen – that every effort would be made to preserve and revive the remaining historic buildings. Approving demolition of this rare cultural resource will not fulfill that promise. So, which will you choose?

We've all been put in a very uncomfortable position and I'm greatly bothered by the premise that there needs to be a loser here. That one good and important purpose must be sacrificed for another good and important purpose. We appreciate beyond measure the work of the Blanchet House, their need to focus on their core mission, and their vision to provide nursing services.

We do not, however, believe all options have been explored. So we ask two things of the City today:

1. Deny the demolition application.
2. Provide resources to explore alternatives.

Restore Oregon and several of our members have offered to help find an alternate win-win solution that could retain and incorporate the Yamaguchi Hotel's important and untold stories into future development of the block. That may well include space for nursing services. But the City needs to participate in this effort, walk the talk of respecting and preserving the cultural heritage of underserved and abused minorities, and put resources towards a better outcome.

Thank you –



Executive Director, Emeritus