

## A Loss of 10% in Old Town--Big Deal!

By Art DeMuro

After two years of citizen input, the City Council has been presented with a blueprint to bolster the recent substantial leaps forward achieved in the Skidmore/Old Town District. This 20 block area has entered a full-fledged renaissance that has reversed course from the forgotten neighborhood defined by vacancy, vagrancy and neglect. Within a short five year period, we have witnessed \$150 million of investment commitments and completions—developments that span all sectors.

The Portland Historic Landmarks Commission has crafted new Design Guidelines that further support Skidmore/Old Town's new life. Historic resources will be protected from insensitive renovations and additions. The Guidelines call for new construction and design inspired by the District's large collection of Italianate cast iron buildings but allow contemporary interpretation. Additionally, a city ordinance will encourage the reuse of the invaluable collection of cast iron remnants salvaged during regretful periods of demolition. The City would lead by example by urging that these salvaged treasures be incorporated into properties owned and subsidized by the City itself.

So, where in this well-planned progressive and revitalized picture is the threat to its success? The Planning Commission selected five parcels to host four 12-story towers and one nine-story tower to loom over the District's two- to four-story fine-grained scale. It is a virtual condemnation whereby the boundaries of the vast Central Business District, dominated by large floor plates and height, would be expanded to shrink our Old Town. Recently, one of the four property owners to benefit from such a density increase reasoned that the Planning Commission's recommendation was not that threatening to the District because it would re-define only 10% of the District. I guess 10% does not sound like much except that 50% of the cast iron buildings were already sacrificed in the name of urban renewal through massive demolition. About 10% was lost when the Burnside Bridge was erected and another few percent when the widening of Burnside Road required the City to shear off the facades of a number of historic buildings along its frontage. Another 5% was lost when the City located its modernistic Central Fire Station in the heart of the District. One can see why preservationists who know the District's history are understandably more sensitive to the loss of another 10%.

A recent proclamation from the National Park Service affirms that Portland's proposed Code Amendments threaten not only the unique character of the District but also the prestigious National Historic Landmark designation itself.

The grander, loftier vision of the public sponsored Ankeny/Burnside Development Framework is being ignored. The unique scale and design was to be protected. The consideration of height increases was to take place as part of the new Central Portland Plan and only if economic viability was at stake which it is not. The City Council will consider this matter on December 18 at 2 p.m. and should revel in the success of this neighborhood, which deserves the Council's applause, not its sympathy. The District does not need to be fixed by making it into something it is not.

*(DeMuro is chairman of the Portland Historic Landmarks Commission and president of Venerable Group, Inc., a redevelopment firm specializing in historic commercial renovation.)*