

TESTIMONY OF THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES ON THE DESIGNATION OF THE JAMAICA SAVINGS BANK, QUEENS

April 15, 2008

Good morning Councilmembers. My name is Diane Jackier, Director of External Affairs at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I am here today to testify on the Commission's designation of the Jamaica Savings Bank in Queens.

On October 8, 1974, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation. One witness spoke in favor and a representative of the owner spoke in opposition to designation. The designation was approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission on November 12, 1974, and was subsequently denied by the Board of Estimate. On July 10, 1990, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held another public hearing on the proposed designation. The hearing was continued to September 11, 1990 at the request of a representative of the owner. At the second hearing, two representatives of the owner spoke in opposition to designation; a total of five witnesses at both hearings spoke in favor of designation. The Commission also received about 15 letters expressing support for designation, including one letter from Queens Borough President Claire Shulman, and three letters in opposition to designation, in addition to submissions from the owner's representatives. The designation was approved by the Landmarks Preservation Commission on May 5, 1992, and was subsequently denied by the City Council.

On May 15, 2007, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a third public hearing on the proposed designation. Seven people spoke in favor including Chairwoman Gloria Black of Queens Community Board 12, and representatives of the Central Queens Historical Association, the Queens Preservation Council, the Queens Historical Society, the Historic Districts Council, the New York Landmarks Conservancy, and the Jamaica Center Business Improvement District. A representative of Council Member Leroy G. Comrie, Jr. spoke in favor of designation, contingent upon the approval of the building's owner. On February 12, 2008, the Commission designated Jamaica Savings Bank a New York City landmark.

The former Jamaica Savings Bank, a building which is significant for its architectural merit, was constructed in 1897-98 for the oldest and most prestigious banking institution in Jamaica. Designed by the noted firm of Hough & Deuell, the building is a fine and particularly exuberant example of the classically inspired Beaux-Arts style which became popular in the United States following the 1893

World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, and is one of only a few buildings in the borough of Queens to embrace that architectural aesthetic. The striking facade of the building displays especially rich and fluid ornamental forms reminiscent of French Baroque architecture, skillfully executed in carved limestone and wrought iron. Notable among the facade's decorative motifs is a carved stone beehive, a traditional symbol in the imagery of bank architecture, denoting industry, thrift, and prosperity.

Prominently sited on Jamaica Avenue, the building is an urbane presence on the neighborhood's main commercial thoroughfare. Although the four-story structure is relatively small in scale, the imposing design of the facade conveys a monumentality which is appropriately suited to the distinguished image and reputation of the banking institution, while lending the building the formal elegance of a private club or townhouse. Incorporated in 1866 by a consortium of local citizens—including John A. King, former Governor of the State of New York and the eldest son of Federalist statesman Rufus King—the Jamaica Savings Bank played an important role in the development of Jamaica, at that time a burgeoning commercial center. The success of the organization was marked by its exponential expansion in the late nineteenth century and its need for more commodious—and more conspicuous—quarters. The construction of the bank coincided with the 1898 incorporation of Queens County into the municipal jurisdiction of the City of New York and reflects the metropolitan spirit of the period. The facade of the building maintains its original Beaux-Arts design and survives today essentially intact as a reminder of an important era in Jamaica's history.

The Commission urges you to affirm the designation.

Statement of the Historic Districts Council in support of the designation of the former Jamaica Savings Bank building, 161-02 Jamaica Avenue, Queens, as a New York City Landmark, April 15, 2008.

My name is Edward Kirkland, and I am chair of the Designation Committee of the Board of the Historic Districts Council. The Council supports once again the designation as a New York City Landmark of the former main branch of the Jamaica Savings Bank in the heart of the old central business district of Jamaica at 161-02 Jamaica Avenue. As has been noted, this is the third time that the Commission has designated this building, only to be twice overturned. Having been involved in at least the second attempt at designation in 1990, the Council has a particularly strong hope that this third strike is not an out. If it is not successful, it will be an exceedingly bad omen for the currently growing success of rehabilitation of older areas, business and residential, through preservation and adaptive reuse of older structures.

The building is important for its own sake as architecture and for the role it plays in the old Jamaica business district, especially this important block. Although it is relatively small and on a narrow lot, it is conspicuous because of the impression made by its elaborate design and because its location facing one of the frequent jogs of streets as they cross Jamaica Avenue in the area makes the façade visible well down 161st Street to the north.

The four stories of the front are covered with a lavish panoply of Beaux-Arts ornament clearly intended to catch the eye and establish the importance of the building and the prosperity of the bank that occupied it. The placement of the ornament exemplifies with almost textbook clarity such Beaux-Arts principles as clear marking of functional elements, and the full hierarchy of design from major to minor, from central to flanking, from base to top.

Such an elaborate composition on a small building is exceptional, and is admirably set off by the restrained, elegant Renaissance-style Register Building just to the east, which is similar in scale and material and is now restored and serving as an arts and cultural center. This has been a designated landmark since the time of the first attempt of designating this bank. The bank, even if not by well-known architects, clearly deserves designation as well. The façade is well preserved, even though years of neglect by the previous owners, who passionately resisted designation, have allowed damage to the interior.

The expressed basis of opposition has consistently that Landmark designation would somehow deter development. This is belied by the fact that the second attempt at designation 17 years ago was led by the Greater Jamaica Development Corporation and supported by the nearby Chase Manhattan Bank, which has a branch on the corner a little farther to the east. The Development Corporation has consistently supported preservation as contributing to the revival of Jamaica.

The first attempt to designate the Jamaica Savings Bank was vetoed by the then Borough President Donald Manes, who lent himself to stopping landmarking buildings all over the city, not only in Queens, but the designation of the adjacent Jamaica Register Building was not. This building has been successfully rehabilitated and reused. In the old Jamaica business district development, which was jump-started by the construction of government buildings on vacant sites, is now proceeding vigorously through rehabilitation and reuse of older buildings while the undesignated Jamaica Bank building still remains idle and neglected.

On the Jamaica Avenue front of this block stand not only the Jamaica Savings Bank and the Register Building, but also the Simplified Classical Chase Manhattan Building as well as two other classically-based buildings just to the west. All are largely intact. Preserving this blockfront, and other structures and possibly even other blockfronts, many of which have at least the bones of past excellence and often more, could help recreate something truly special, a distinguished business center of real historic quality, and thus encourage the growing recovery of downtown Jamaica, which now seems to need only a few well-designed actions to at long last succeed. We urge this Council to join with others to support this effort and start out by ratifying the designation of the Jamaica Savings Bank.

TESTIMONY OF THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES ON THE DESIGNATION OF THE AMERICAN BANK NOTE BUILDING, BRONX

April 15, 2008

Good morning Councilmembers. My name is Diane Jackier, Director of External Affairs at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I am here today to testify on the Commission's designation of the American Bank Note Building in the Bronx.

On January 15, 2008, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation. Three people spoke in favor including representatives of the owners, the Municipal Arts Society, and the Historic Districts Council. Bronx Community Board #2 asked for additional time to evaluate the proposed designation. There were no speakers in opposition. Subsequent to the hearing, the Commission received a letter in support of designation from the community board. The Commission previously held three public hearings in 1992 on the proposed designation. On February 5, 2008, the Commission designated the American Bank Note Company Building a New York City landmark.

Designed by the architectural firm Kirby, Petit & Green between 1909 and 1911, the American Bank Note Building was an important symbol of progress for this prominent securities printing firm. The leading producer of money, securities and other types of printed and engraved products, the American Bank Note Company constructed the plant during a period when it restructured its management and expanded its production facilities. Architecturally, the building recalls a time when the emerging discipline of industrial engineering was beginning to be incorporated into the exterior expression of new industrial facilities. Signature elements of industrial architecture, such as the saw-tooth roof and large expanses of industrial windows, allowed ample light into the interior spaces of the plant, aiding both the fine work done in the pressrooms and the meticulous hand work of the engravers. The arsenal-like exterior of the plant, coupled with the enclosure of the site by a brick wall, embodied a sense of strength while also providing security for the specialized printing operation. The crenellated square tower rising above the Lafayette Avenue wing and the articulation of the walls as massive brick piers forming multi-story arcades, reinforced this fortress-like character.

Since closing its printing operations in 1986, the American Bank Note Company building has served as home to a variety of tenants. Soon after the property was vacated by the American Bank Note Company, the building was used to provide space for garment manufacturing, and became known as the Bronx Apparel Center. It recently served as an alternative high school for students who have dropped out of or

have been dismissed from regular schools. The current owners of the building plan to undertake a commercial adaptive reuse project.

The Commission urges you to affirm the designation.

TESTIMONY OF THE LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION BEFORE THE CITY COUNCIL SUBCOMMITTEE ON LANDMARKS, PUBLIC SITING AND MARITIME USES ON THE DESIGNATION OF CONGREGATION TIFEREETH ISRAEL, QUEENS
April 15, 2008

Good morning Councilmembers. My name is Diane Jackier, Director of External Affairs at the Landmarks Preservation Commission. I am here today to testify on the Commission's designation of Congregation Tifereth Israel in Queens.

On January 15, 2008, the Landmarks Preservation Commission held a public hearing on the proposed designation. Five people spoke in favor, including representatives of the Landmarks Conservancy, the Municipal Arts Society, the Historic Districts Council, the Board of Trustees of Congregation Tifereth Israel, and the Council of Jewish Émigré Community Organization. Additionally, the Commission received letters in support of designation from Queens Borough President Helen Marshall, City Council Member Hiram Monserrate, Queens Community Board 3 Chair Martin Maier, and the Queens Jewish Historical Society. On February 12, 2008, the Commission designated Congregation Tifereth Israel a New York City landmark.

The oldest active synagogue in Corona, the Congregation Tifereth Israel is a rare survivor of the earliest Jewish synagogues built in Queens. This synagogue, whose full name is translated as the Congregation Independent Community, Glory of Israel, People of Corona, was constructed in 1911 to house a congregation of Jews that had relocated to Queens from other parts of New York City. Corona had a relatively small enclave of Jews at the beginning of the twentieth century; of approximately 1.3 million Jews in New York City in 1913, about 23,000 lived in the Borough of Queens. The original members of the Congregation Tifereth Israel predominantly came from the tenement district of the Lower East Side, which was home to an enormous Yiddish-speaking immigrant community hailing mostly from Eastern Europe. In 1918, Eastern Queens had 18 synagogues, two of which were located in Corona. Of these two synagogues, only the Congregation Tifereth Israel survives.

The Congregation Tifereth Israel is strikingly reminiscent of synagogues found in the Jewish enclaves of the Lower East Side. These synagogues, which had to be shoehorned into narrow tenement lots, were often similar in size, material and proportion to their neighboring tenements and commercial buildings. Often executed in a neo-Classical or Beaux-Arts style with Moorish details, these synagogues typically featured symmetrical tripartite facades with a central entrance and corner towers. It is notable that the

Congregation Tifereth Israel synagogue follows this pattern, considering its location in a small-town environment ungoverned by the restraints of the densely urban Lower East Side.

Designed by local architect C. L. Varrone, the synagogue is two stories high and was originally clad with horizontal clapboard siding. It has pointed arched windows, a tripartite upper-story window with a roundel featuring a Star of David in colored glass, and decorative wood ornament at its gabled parapet. The original wood stoop and railing has been replaced with a brick porch with an iron railing, and the wood clapboard siding has been covered with stucco. Despite these alterations, the Congregation Tifereth Israel remains a rare survivor of the earliest synagogues in Queens and a striking representative of a regional vernacular style.

The Commission urges you to affirm the designation.