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HCC expansion halted over building's height

By TBO.com



Work on the Hillsborough County Community College's expansion project in Ybor City has ground to a halt after school officials learned that architectural plans for the new student services building exceeded Tampa's height limits by 15 feet.

HCC spokeswoman Ashley Carl said the college decided to "voluntarily" shut down the \$14 million construction project last Friday after learning about the possible violation.

The project's blueprints called for a 60-foot tall structure, she said, exceeding the 45-foot limit for YC-3 zoning - a special code required of buildings at HCC's Ybor City campus.

HCC officials blame the project's architect, HuntonBrady of Orlando, for the blunder.

"We are required to abide by the city's building codes and zoning regulations," Carl said. "The architect should have known that and we are holding them responsible for it."

Representatives for HuntonBrady didn't immediately return a call seeking comment.

Carl couldn't say when work on the project would resume, but said revised architectural plans would ultimately have to be approved by the state college's board of trustees.

She said construction on the new building hadn't yet reached the 60-foot height.

"As of right now, we are in compliance with the city's regulations," she said.

City officials were informed of the project's temporary shutdown on Thursday.

"Although options are still being considered, HCC does not intend to proceed with further construction until the architects provide an acceptable option to both our board and the city," Martha Kaye Koehler, the college's attorney, wrote to City Attorney Chip Fletcher.

While the college is subject to Tampa's building and zoning codes, the city doesn't have the authority to send in its building inspectors or place a stop work order on the project.

"We have no jurisdiction over the construction of the building," said John Barrios, director of the city's Construction Services Division. "The college has its own building officials."

Carl said HCC doesn't have the staff to review architectural plans for its construction projects.

"We rely on the architects to follow the city's zoning regulations," she said.

The state-funded community college ran into opposition earlier this year from the Barrio Latino Commission over the contemporary design of the 63,000-square-foot building.

Ybor City is listed on the National Register of Historic places.

Local preservationists argue that the student services building is too modern for the historic district.

HCC officials said they didn't need to adhere to the Latino Commission's historic preservation guidelines because state law exempts colleges from local codes.

Carl said the dispute had nothing to do with the project being temporarily shut down.

"That's a totally separate issue," she said.

Attorney Mark Bentley, who represents the Cuban Club and several Ybor City property owners in the dispute, said he notified the city last month about the possibility that the project would violate Tampa's comprehensive land use plan and zoning regulations.

"They were between a rock and a hard place," he said. "They had to shut it down."

Bentley said the development means that if HCC wants to get a variance to build to 60 feet, they'll have to go before the eight-member Latino Commission for review. He said his clients are willing to work with HCC officials on a resolution to the ongoing dispute.

Two weeks ago, the city council passed a resolution requesting that the city's legal department seek an opinion from Florida's Attorney General Bill McCollum about whether state government agencies must follow local architectural guidelines.

Mayor Pam Iorio and HCC President Gwen Stephenson recently agreed to allow future designs to be reviewed by staff from the city's historic preservation department.

But the deal, which will be part of an interlocal agreement, won't involve review by the Barrio Latino Commission, a volunteer board that regulates building designs in Ybor.

Meanwhile, the controversy has attracted the attention of state preservationists.

Angelo Perez, a member of the Florida Historical Commission, said plans for the new building were never submitted to the state Division of Historical Resources for review and comment, which is required before state funding for the project is approved.

He wants the state to force the college to adhere to Ybor City's historical standards.

"Why should they be exempt from the same rules that everyone else follows?" he said.

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