

ITEM #: 27  
DATE: 07-26-11

## COUNCIL ACTION FORM

**SUBJECT: DEMOLITION OF FORMER GREEK HOUSE AT 129 ASH AVENUE**

**BACKGROUND:**

St. Thomas Aquinas Church owns property at 129 Ash Avenue in the Greek house neighborhood south across Lincoln Way from the Iowa State University (ISU) campus, on the west side of Ash Avenue (See Attachment A). To the north, south, southwest, and northwest of the property are fraternities and sororities. To the west is a surface parking lot also owned by St. Thomas Aquinas Church. Across Ash Avenue to the east is Buchanan Hall, which is a student residence hall owned by ISU.

On the property is a nine-unit apartment building, which was built around 1913 and housed the Pi Beta Phi sorority until at least 1936. In the survey of potentially historic properties conducted for the City, Will Page identified this residence as architecturally and historically compatible as an example of a wood frame Greek chapter house, noting that it calls attention to the relocation of Greek houses from west of the ISU campus to this area. Since siding has covered the original exterior material and details, it is difficult to determine its historic integrity.

St. Thomas Aquinas Church has owned the property since 1973 to provide housing for pastors and staff. The Church proposes to demolish the existing building, combine the subject property with the properties containing the church and the existing parking lot to the west, and construct a parking deck that extends from Ash Avenue through to Lynn Avenue.

**This property is within the Residential High Density (RH) zoning district and the East University Impacted Area (O-UIE) overlay zoning district. Ames *Municipal Code* Section 29.1110(2) (Attachment B) requires City Council approval for demolition of an existing or former Greek house in the East University Impacted Area.** The purpose of the strict demolition standards in this district is to assure

*. . . architectural compatibility with the valued characteristics of existing structures and landscapes, such as location, height, materials and the appearance of variety of forms and of architectural styles . . .*

Therefore, demolition of existing (Greek) structures is prohibited unless

*[t]he structure cannot be used for the original intended purpose and/or no alternative reasonable use can be identified and the property owner can show evidence that an economic hardship will be created if the structure cannot be removed.*

This standard establishes that at least one of the following two criteria must be met:

- that the building cannot be used as a Greek house
- that the building cannot be used for an alternative reasonable use allowed in the zoning code, in this case, other residential uses and several institutional uses,

This standard also requires that it be demonstrated that leaving the existing building in place will create an economic hardship.

To determine economic hardship, the City Council is to determine if prohibiting demolition:

*will deprive the owner of the property of reasonable use of, or economic return on, the property. After reviewing the evidence, the Council may deny the application, may approve demolition, or may table the application for a Demolition Permit for a period of time not to exceed 30 days. The 30-day period will permit an opportunity for other alternatives to be evaluated.*

Generally, this applicant states that it meets these standards because:

- the current building can no longer be used as a Greek residence,
- it operates at a loss as an apartment building,
- the Church does not own the property in order to make an economic return,
- and that parking is a reasonable use for the property, which would be prohibited if Council denies the demolition request (See Attachments C and D).

This request is different from the recent request from the Sigma Chi Alumni Board for demolition of the Greek house at 2136 Lincoln Way in several respects. The building at 2136 Lincoln Way was being used as a Greek house at the time the request was made and after demolition the chapter will build a new Greek house for that use to continue. The building at 129 Ash Avenue has not been used as a Greek residence for over 70 years, and, after demolition the use will be parking to support the church, which is also an allowed use.

Also, the Sigma Chi alumni board based its request for 2136 Lincoln Way on economic hardship if the structure was not removed. Supporting information showed that the cost to convert the existing house to meet the needs of current and future students is not sustainable, but that by building a new Greek house, that use is sustainable. Since the Sigma Chi chapter intends to continue its use of the building as a Greek residence, alternative uses were not explored. It is important to note that demolition of the Greek house at 2136 Lincoln Way is only permitted once the funding is in place to building the new Greek house. The house cannot be demolished to make way for any other use. That would require a new request to the City Council.

Similar to the Sigma Chi case, the basis of the St. Thomas Aquinas Church demolition request is the criterion in the Zoning Ordinance that “[t]he structure cannot be used for the original intended purpose.” Supporting information in the letter from RDG Planning and Design (Attachment D) states that the building does not provide any of the living conditions, amenities, or aesthetics to which current and future students are accustomed. It does not provide for the flexibility in the use of space needed for living/learning environments, group educational and social activities or community

building. Fund-raising for Greek renovation is very difficult, there are no Greek alumni of this building as a Greek house, there is no current Greek chapter interested in this building, and the current appearance of the building does not offer much potential for fund-raising. Especially important is that 40 to 50 residents are needed to sustain a Greek chapter house and this house would need to be almost doubled in size to accommodate that many students. The property does not have sufficient space for such an addition and the parking required for expanding the capacity of the residence.

To demonstrate economic hardship the Church has provided the following information:

- Apartment rents are from \$130 per month to \$500 per month.
- Rents are discounted because some of the renters are staff of the Church.
- The total annual income from the apartments was \$33,540.
- Total annual expenses were \$34,195. Expenses include insurance, taxes, utilities, maintenance, management and cost for some major improvements, such as replacing the roof and windows.

This information was compiled several years ago for another purpose and was not prepared for this application. It is based on the Church owning the property. If the analysis was made to determine if the apartment use can be sustained long-term it may be appropriate to include updated market rate rents, perhaps \$400 to \$700 per month, and the annualized cost of the property and building. The property is currently assessed at \$615,000, which may be lower than the market value due to the tax exemption for religious uses. The Church does not have a financial purpose for the property and thus has not presented any type of profit/loss analysis to determine financial viability of the apartment use.

**If demolition is approved, it is important that the City has confidence that a minor site development plan and architectural drawings for the new development of the site can be approved as meeting the requirements of the Zoning Overlay District and all other applicable standards of the City of Ames.** Architectural schematic drawings for the proposed new parking structure have been submitted (See Attachment E). The Church is still working with its architect and contractor on plans for the project and staff has not yet determined if the building and site plans meet the design standards of the East University Impacted Overlay Zoning District. **Therefore, approval of demolition should be conditional on an approved Minor Site Development Plan and submittal of complete plans for a building permit application consistent with the architectural schematic drawings in Attachment E and with any applicable design standards.**

Although it is unlikely that the Church would find itself unable to build the new structure once the Greek house were demolished, the City Council may also want to consider a condition that would reduce the likelihood of this scenario. **Submittal to staff of proof of financing for the new parking structure could also be required before the Demolition Permit is approved.** (This was a condition of approval for demolition of the Sigma Chi House.)

## **ALTERNATIVES:**

1. The City Council can approve demolition of the Greek residence at 129 Ash Avenue provided the following conditions are met before the Demolition Permit is issued:
  - a. A Minor Site Development Plan is approved by the Planning and Housing Department.
  - b. Submittal of complete plans for a building permit application consistent with the architectural schematic drawings in Attachment E and with any applicable design standards.
  - c. Proof of financing for the building as reflected on Attachment E is approved by the City Attorney.
2. The City Council can approve demolition of the Greek residence at 129 Ash Avenue **without conditions**.
3. The City Council can **deny** demolition of the Greek residence at 129 Ash Avenue if it finds that compliance with the criteria in *Ames Municipal Code* Section 29.1110(2) has not been met.
4. The City Council can **table** the application for a Demolition Permit for a period of time not to exceed 30 days and direct that, if no suitable alternative is presented to the City Council during that period, the Demolition Permit shall be issued.
5. The City Council can **defer action** regarding this request to allow the applicant time to provide to the City Council additional information justifying the stated “economic hardship”.

## **MANAGER’S RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

**This is an important decision for the community, because how the criteria for demolition are interpreted in this case could well be expected in future requests. Although the appearance of this building is much different than the other larger, more stylized, masonry Greek houses, the same standards apply to the demolition of each. If other Greek houses can no longer be used for that purpose, it is important that the buildings be adapted for other types of residential, education, religion, museum, community use or other permitted uses. Past trends would indicate that demolition of these buildings will most likely be followed by new apartment buildings.**

This is also an important decision for the St. Thomas Aquinas Church and Catholic Student Center. Through significant capital investment, the Church has committed to remaining at its present location near Iowa State University for a long time. It has the opportunity to build a parking structure that will increase on-site parking and make it easier and safer for people to participate in its programs. It is the Church’s intention to start that project with demolition at the beginning of August.

The building has not been a Greek residence for over 70 years. In fact, at the time that the current demolition standard was adopted it was not included in a list of current and former Greek houses provided by the ISU Office of Greek Affairs. The applicant has provided evidence that it is no longer possible for this building to be a residence for Greek students. The Church also maintains that the building is not sustainable as an apartment building. It proposes a parking structure that would be an accessory use to the Church and states that this is a reasonable use that the owner would be deprived of if the demolition permit were denied.

If the City Council concludes that the criteria for demolition have been met, then the City Council should adopt Alternative #1, thereby **approving** demolition of the Greek residence at 129 Ash Avenue provided the following conditions are met before the Demolition Permit is issued:

- a. A Minor Site Development Plan is approved by the Planning and Housing Department.
- b. Submittal of complete plans for a building permit application consistent with the architectural schematic drawings in Attachment E and with any applicable design standards.
- c. Proof of financing for the building as reflected on Attachment E is approved by the City Attorney.

If the City Council would like more information from the Church in order to determine if an economic hardship exists, then Alternative #5 should be supported, thereby **deferring** this matter.

If, however, the City Council concludes that the existing building can provide economic return as an apartment building or some other use allowed in the RH zoning district, whether owned by the Church or some other owner, or otherwise concludes that the criteria for demolition have not been met, then the City Council should adopt Alternative #3, **denying** demolition of the Greek residence at 129 Ash Avenue.

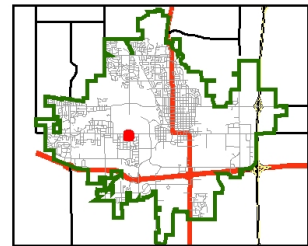
Attachment A



**Location Map**  
**129 Ash**



0 50 100 200  
Feet



## Attachment B

### Sec. 29.1110. "O-UIE" EAST UNIVERSITY IMPACTED DISTRICT

(1) **Purpose.** The purpose of the East University Impacted District is to include areas where the majority of the facilities were developed by "Greek" organizations as housing for students, in order to maintain housing opportunities and housing density, to the extent that base zoning would allow, while assuring the provision of such requirements as adequate parking and architectural compatibility with the valued characteristics of existing structures and landscapes, such as location, height, materials and the appearance of variety of forms and of architectural styles, by creating regulatory standards for commercial and high density residential uses, but not impacting single or two family uses.

(2) **Demolition.** Demolition of existing structures shall be strictly prohibited except in the instance of meeting either subsection (a) or (b) below:

(a) The owner can provide evidence that the structure was never used by "Greek" organizations as housing for students.

(b) The structure cannot be used for the original intended purpose and/or no alternative reasonable use can be identified and the property owner can show evidence that an economic hardship will be created if the structure cannot be removed. To prove economic hardship, the applicant shall submit where appropriate to the applicant's proposal, the following information to be considered.

(i) Estimate of the cost of the proposed demolition,

(ii) Estimate of any additional cost that would be incurred to rehabilitate the building for the intended use.

(iii) A report from a licensed engineer or architect with experience in rehabilitation as to the structural soundness of the structure or structures on the property and their suitability for rehabilitation. (This shall be required only when the applicant's proposal is based on an argument of structural soundness.)

(iv) Estimated market value of the property in its current condition; after completion of demolition; after any changes recommended by the City Council; and after renovation of the existing property for continued use.

(v) An estimate from an architect, developer, real estate consultant, appraiser, or other real estate professional experienced in rehabilitation as to the economic feasibility of rehabilitation or reuse of the existing structure on the property.

(vi) Amount paid for the property, the date of purchase, and the party from whom purchased, including a description of the relationship, if any, between the owner of record or applicant and the person from whom the property was purchased, and any terms of financing between the seller and buyer.

(vii) If the property is income-producing, the annual gross income from the property for the previous two years; itemized operating and maintenance expenses for the previous two years; and depreciation deduction and annual cash flow before and after debt service, if any, during the same period.

(viii) Remaining balance on any mortgage or other financing secured by the property and annual debt service, if any, for the previous two years.

(ix) All appraisals obtained within the previous two years by the owner or applicant in connection with the purchase, financing, or ownership of the property.

(x) Any listing of the property for sale or rent, price asked and offers received, if any, within the previous two years.

(xi) Assessed value of the property according to the most recent assessments.

(xii) Real estate taxes for the previous two years.

(xiii) Form of ownership or operation of the property, whether sole proprietorship, for-profit or not-for-profit corporation, limited partnership, joint venture, or other.

(xiii) Approval of a minor site development plan and architectural drawings as meeting the requirements of subsection (3) through (6) below and all other applicable standards of the City of Ames.

(c) **Determination of Economic Hardship.** The City Council shall review all the evidence and information required of an applicant and make a determination whether the denial of a demolition permit has deprived, or will deprive, the owner of the property of reasonable use of, or economic return on, the property. After reviewing the evidence, the Council may deny the application, may approve demolition, or may table the application for a Demolition Permit for a period of time not to exceed 30 days. The 30-day period will permit an opportunity for other alternatives to be evaluated. If a suitable alternative is not presented to the Council within the 30-day period, the Demolition Permit shall be issued.

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Attachment C



**St. Thomas Aquinas Church**  
& Catholic Student Center at Iowa State University

2210 Lincoln Way

Ames, Iowa 50014

(515) 292-3810

July 5, 2011

Honorable Anne Campbell, Mayor, and Members of the Ames City Council,

St. Thomas Aquinas Parish and Catholic Student Center has undertaken the construction of a motor vehicle parking structure over its current parking lot and also on the site of a nine-unit apartment building at 129 Ash that the parish acquired in 1973 as housing for its pastors and staff.

This apartment building was the Pi Beta Phi sorority from about 1917 until at least 1936. In that year the Ames phone book still showed the address of Pi Beta Phi as 129 Ash. By 1940, however, the Polk's Directory showed 129 Ash as the Hillcrest Apartments and listed the occupants of the nine apartments.

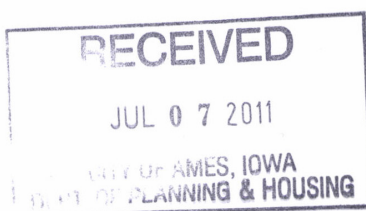
Although 129 Ash has been an apartment building for over 70 years, its prior use as a sorority house triggers Section 29.1110 (2) of the Municipal Code which prohibits its demolition unless the Council determines that such prohibition will deny a "reasonable use" of the property. The Code section requires that an applicant for a permit to demolish a former "Greek House" submit to the Council those informational items listed in subsection 29.1110 (2) (b) that are "appropriate to the applicant's proposal." In that regard, based on consultation with the City Planning staff, the Parish submits the following:

1. The assessed value of the building to be demolished is \$315, 000.00.
2. Real estate taxes for the past two years have been: 2010/11 - \$10,280.00; 2009/10 - \$9,982.00.
3. The attached site development plan and architectural drawings that meet the "Development Standards", "Architectural Design Standards", and "Landscaping and Fences Standards" of the East University Impacted District, and all other applicable standards of the City of Ames.

From the materials submitted it is hoped that you will find that the proposed parking structure is a "reasonable use" of the site that will demonstrate "architectural compatibility with the valued characteristics of existing structures".

Respectfully Submitted,

Fr. Jon Seda, Pastor  
St. Thomas Aquinas Church and Catholic  
Student Center





## Attachment D



July 15, 2011

Jeffrey D. Benson  
Planner, Department of Planning and Housing  
City of Ames  
515 Clark Avenue  
Ames, IA 50010

Dear Mr. Benson:

This letter is in reference to St. Thomas Aquinas Parish and Catholic Student Center and the proposed Motor Vehicle Parking Structure project. As part of the preliminary design for this project, it is proposed that the apartment building at 129 Ash will be demolished to allow for parking expansion on this site.

### History

This building was originally used as the Pi Beta Phi sorority from about 1917 until at least 1936. Our research has not uncovered floor plans of the existing building; however a photo of the original exterior is included below. By 1940 the building was converted into nine separate apartment units which were called the Hillcrest Apartments. In 1973, the St. Thomas Aquinas Parish purchased the building to utilize it as housing for its pastors and staff.

### Current Usage

Currently, the building is still being utilized as apartments. The building is arranged as follows with square footages noted obtained from the City Assessors property record card.

- Basement Level: Total area of 2,369 square feet. A common laundry room of approximately 674 square feet occupies space on this level. The remaining space is non-habitable mechanical space.
- First Floor: Total area of 3,003 square feet. This level is divided into three separate apartments. Two of these have direct access from the exterior and one is accessed from a shared entry at the northeast corner of the building.
- Second Floor: Total area of 2,585 square feet. This level is divided into three separate apartments, all of which are accessed from a shared entry/stair/corridor at the northeast corner of the building.
- Third Floor: Total area of 1,792 square feet. This level is divided into three separate apartments, all of which are accessed from a shared entry/stair/corridor system at the northeast corner of the building.

No substantial improvements to the building have been made during the time period that St. Thomas Aquinas has owned the building. St. Thomas Aquinas does not have current floor plans of the building, but an image of the current building exterior is shown below.



1918 Original Exterior Image



Current Exterior Image



### Evaluation

We have reviewed the existing building to ascertain if it could be returned to use as a new “Greek” house. In developing new, modern “Greek” housing, the following trends and issues are key factors for this type of facility on a major university campus, like Iowa State University, in recruiting and maintaining students and alumni membership in today’s market.

1. Students entering college today have increased expectations of their living conditions. They typically come from homes where they have never shared a bedroom and seek out housing that provides amenities and aesthetics consistent with the conditions they came from. These include:
  - a. Upscale space amenities including access to the internet, video, privacy, recreation and storage space.
  - b. Dining options that allow for on the go and off hour access.
  - c. Exterior living and recreation opportunities in close proximity.
2. These housing environments need for provide flexibility of spaces.
  - a. Living/learning environments are now combined as students are in a multi–tasking mode.
  - b. Group/individual areas are needed for meeting and studying to support and encourage community building activities
  - c. Providing space for informal socializing and small–group studying is critical.
3. Restrictions on funds are becoming an ever increasing issue for the houses.
  - a. Funding raising abilities are very difficult in the current economy and it appears this will be the course for quite some time.
  - b. The cost of operating expenses has to be considered as a key factor in the ongoing viability of the houses.
    - i. Efficient energy usage is critical and has a major economic impact.
    - ii. Lower maintenance costs related to construction materials and finishes have an impact on the long term operations.
4. A house size to accommodate approximately 40–50 people (beds) living on site is desired to keep the group viable and competitive with other fraternities or sororities. This is related to the revenue needed to maintain the services provided in Greek housing, as well as the participation level expected in community activities.

Following is some information showing the comparison of a couple of other existing Greek Houses at Iowa State University who have occupancy numbers in the 40–50 beds range as noted above.

Delta Upsilon accommodates 44–46 beds. This house is currently being remodeled.

Sleeping/Study/Bath Areas: 6,517 square feet  
 Living/Dining/Service/Storage Areas: 6,218 square feet  
 Total Area: 12,735 square feet = +/-280 square feet/person

Alpha Chi Omega accommodates +/- 50 beds.

Sleeping/Study/Bath Areas: 6,630 square feet  
 Living/Dining/Service/Storage Areas: 6,688 square feet  
 Total Area: 13,518 square feet = +/-270 square feet/person

### 129 Ash Usage

129 Ash, known as the Cardinal House by the St. Thomas Aquinas Parish, currently exists as a 3.1/2 story, 7,680 square foot apartment building consisting of nine rental units. If the square feet/person noted above for the Delta Upsilon and Alpha Chi Omega houses are use for comparison, the existing Cardinal House shell would accommodate 27 people if developed for Greek housing to current comparable standards. To accommodate 50 people as noted earlier, the current structure would need to be expanded by approximately 6,320 square feet, an 83% increase. The site area available for expansion would be to the west. This would result in no on–site parking for the house further compounding the existing street parking problems.

As shown by the above images, the original exterior shell of the building has been modified significantly from when the building was used as the Pi Beta Phi House. These changes have not respected the architectural character of the original building or the other Iowa State University Greek Houses in this area. These changes have resulted in an unappealing appearance to the building. To return the exterior back to some of this original character and provide an exterior appearance that would be appealing for the recruitment membership today, the majority of the exterior envelop would need to be changed and modified. This would essentially results in the demolition of the existing building to reconstruct a new structure with the



appropriate visual character. Unfortunately, the site area available at the 129 Ash property is not of sufficient size to accommodate the square footage of building and site amenities needed for a viable, new modern Greek House.

The concept for the development of this site as part of the St. Thomas Aquinas parking structure is shown on the attached images. I feel that the demolition of the existing Cardinal House apartment building at 129 Ash will remove a structure that is out of character with the Greek Houses that exist in this neighborhood. The proposed design provides visual linkage to the existing St. Thomas Aquinas building and provides an aesthetic image that is not overbearing and is a good neighbor to the Greek Houses in this neighborhood. The expansion of parking in this location will also help to ease the demand for street parking in the neighborhood, helping to provide a safer environment.

Sincerely,



H. Scott Sankey, AIA  
Partner / Studio Director  
RDG Planning & Design



Attachment E



Overall Site Image looking Northeast



Looking Northwest from Ash Avenue





Looking Southeast from Lynn Avenue