

LOCAL NEWS

Boulder council landmarks Marpa House property with plans to cite Shambhala sex misconduct allegations

Friend opposed



Matthew Jonas / Staff Photographer

Boulder's Planning Board last week continued its meeting on plans to turn the historic Marpa House into apartments for University of Colorado Boulder students to allow the building's owner and city staff to draft conditions for approval in response to criticisms levied by the community, most of which centered on issues such as noise, partying, parking, and overcrowding. (Matthew Jonas / Staff Photographer)





Editor's note: *An earlier version of this story misreported the plans the new owner of the so-called Marpa House at 891 12th St. has for the property. The story has been updated to reflect that the owner has no plans to allow a fraternity to establish itself at the residence.*

City Councilwoman Rachel Friend spearheaded a difficult conversation among Boulder public officials this week concerning sexual assault and a local landmark designation that attracted much local attention.

It resulted in a plan that may spark a trend for adding new context to historically preserved properties in the city.

Making a decision on whether it would be appropriate to grant the status to the so-called Marpa House at 891 12th St. would be impossible, Friend felt, without knowing more about the sexual misconduct allegations against leaders of the Boulder-born Buddhist organization Shambhala International, which had been associated with the property since the mid-1970s before it was recently sold.

Before it was taken over, the recently-troubled Shambhala, the structure, built in 1923, was used by Sigma Alpha Epsilon and Zeta Beta Tau, with Friend noting fraternities have been associated with higher rates of incidence of sexual assault.

The councilwoman felt city staff prepared more “pros” of granting individual landmark stature to Marpa House than “cons,” which may have involved traumatizing any potential victims by recognizing the building, and requested Council wait to make a vote on the matter until more research could be done.

Shambhala started Naropa University, and “owes to the widespread popularity of Buddhism in not only Boulder, but I think in the United States,” city Senior Historic Preservation Planner James Hewat said. “It was one of the pioneering organizations in terms of that.”

Naropa University has been independent from Shambhala International since 1987, and [in](#)

The councilwoman's preference was not the course taken by the rest of her colleagues, with Friend the only opposing vote in a 7-1 decision to landmark Marpa House on Tuesday, with Councilwoman Mirabai Nagle absent.

"We received emails about sexual assaults that occurred at this address, I think we even got a request to tear down Marpa House rather than preserve it," Friend said.

The building's new owner, John Kirkland, claimed the process by which the city went about the landmark designation was "deeply flawed," but ultimately supported the move.

The "city's non-binding pre-application process was abused to try and justify a controversial forced designation of a property that was under contract to be sold," Kirkland stated in a presentation to Council. "Elected and appointed city officials, in close concert with affluent neighbors, were aggressively advocating for a hurry-up nomination without once contacting owners."

Mayor Sam Weaver questioned whether any of those points had bearing on the decision, and Kirkland acknowledged he eventually came into agreement with the proposal.

"I just want to caution that landmarks can be used as a weapon to stop a sale, or to stop a property from a buyer and seller, and I would just encourage Council to maybe look at how the process is put in place and provide an off-ramp in the future so you don't have a situation I ran into on this property," Kirkland said.

The owner is currently renting the property to students on individual leases, and there are no plans to allow a fraternity to establish at the property.

Council agreed the property, now known as SAE-ZBT-Marpa House for its affiliation with two fraternities before the religious organization took it over, should acknowledge its "full past" with its new status, as Councilman Aaron Brockett suggested, possibly by including a recognition of sexual misconduct survivors on a plaque for the structure.

"I appreciate Rachel bringing this up," Councilwoman Mary Young said. "It would be actually interesting to conduct this kind of exercise going back through all our landmarked buildings. ... I do think that our tendency, at least in this country, is to erase the 'bad' history, and including some of this bad history in the plaque would be a movement in the right direction."