

Three Suits Filed Against Met's Plan to Expand

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The Metropolitan Museum Historic District Coalition in conjunction with two local residents has filed a suit against the Metropolitan Museum of Art over its plans to expand its grounds.

The expansion would involve work in the plaza surrounding the Museum's front entrance and the grassy areas around the Lehman collection in the back, as well as the construction of a truck route underneath the museum. Holzer said the truck route would provide a safer way to transport works of art to and from the museum, while the expanded underground areas would be used as storage for the museum's Costume Institute and Education Department.

But Pat Nicholson, a spokesperson for the coalition, says that the museum has gone against its word. "We do have language where the museum very clearly states that it would not expand into the park," Nicholson said, referring to a document that former Parks Commissioner August Heckscher added to the Museum's 1971 expansion plans. Nicholson said that 11 of the 14 building corporations in the historic district, representing about 600 people, have supported the lawsuit.

Harold Holzer, the vice president of communications and marketing at the museum, claims the agreement was not to expand beyond the museum's "footprint," which he says includes the area of the proposed development. Holzer said he believes the "small group of dissidents" does not compare with the larger community that wants the Met to be "the best it can be."

Nonetheless, the lawsuit has required the museum to postpone construction until after the hearing in March. Holzer said that the museum's plans are not definite, so the proposed construction remains in the distant future. The duration of the work is likewise indefinite, he said.

Responding to concerns that the fountains on the plaza would be removed, Holzer said the museum would definitely reinstall them after construction was completed. He said that the project would provide a convenient opportunity, as the fountains' deteriorating plumbing could be fixed while the rest of the construction was underway.

One of the primary claims against the museum is that because the expansion requires government funding and approval, it must first pass the State Environmental Quality Review Act and the City Environmental Quality Review. These statutes require development proposals to be examined--in this case by the Parks Department--for possible environmental damage.

The coalition's attorney, Arnold Weiss, said that the museum's expansion is also in violation of the Uniform Land Use Review Procedure. The ULURP was enacted in the 1970s to prevent the type of rash zoning changes and construction projects that the city witnessed in the mid-20th century. Weiss said that the museum construction requires city approval first, just as highway and apartment building construction would.

In 1971, a group brought a similar suit against the museum when after a proposal for the Lehman Wing. The New York State Court of Appeals ruled that since the museum would be using property that had been designated for expansion, the construction was legitimate.

Although scaffolding currently stands in the Museum's plaza area, Holzer said it was being used for cleaning and renovation of the façade and is not part of the proposed expansion.