

City Council Stiffens Penalties for Not Preserving Historic Properties

■ **Law:** The ordinance clamps down on owners who illegally demolish or deliberately neglect landmarks. It was prompted by the razing or deterioration of several historic sites in recent years.

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An ordinance designed to strengthen Los Angeles' historic-cultural monuments laws by penalizing owners who illegally demolish or purposely neglect their landmark properties was passed unanimously Friday by the City Council.

The new measure allows the city to withhold new building permits for five years on a site where a designated city landmark was demolished without proper permits.

It also gives the city the right to repair or fence in a monument building if the owner has allowed it to suffer from vandalism, fire or severe deterioration—a situation city officials call "demolition by neglect." The city will now assess the owners for the costs of protection and repair.

"This ordinance will give teeth to the enforcement of the cultural heritage ordinance," said Councilman Joel Wachs, who sponsored the measure with Councilwoman Gloria Molina. "The existing ordinance didn't give penalties to people, and these penalties are tough enough that it takes away the

incentive to go around the law."

Wachs said that the ordinance had been prompted by the attempted demolitions and neglect of such city landmarks as the McKinley Mansion in Lafayette Park, which an owner illegally tried to tear down early this year, and the Garden Court Apartments in Hollywood, a once-luxurious apartment house that became so deteriorated that it was nicknamed "Hotel Hell."

Owners of both properties wanted to demolish the buildings and redevelop the sites, despite city monument designation. The city's existing historic-cultural monuments ordinance gives the Cultural Heritage Commission the ability to delay—with City Council approval—demolitions of designated landmarks for as long as a year. At least 10 of the city's 460 landmarks have been torn down.

The owners of the 70-year-old McKinley Mansion obtained an illegal demolition permit by using a false address, according to city officials, and put a bulldozer to the Italian Renaissance-style residence last New Year's Eve. Neighbors called authorities, however, and the demolition was stopped before it was completed.

The Garden Court Apartments were not so lucky. The former home of actors and movie moguls such as Louis B. Mayer, Fatty Arbuckle and Mack Sennett was declared a city monument in 1981. But it was so vandalized and fire-damaged that officials eventually called it a public hazard and an eyesore. It was demolished in 1984.

Another proposed ordinance, still in draft form, could make it even more difficult for owners to demolish city cultural monuments, Wachs said. This measure would increase the time over which demolitions could be delayed from one to five years, and add a requirement that owners would have to prove that the presence of the landmark on their properties constitutes an "economic hardship."

The council vote Friday came only hours after a fire, described by a Los Angeles City Fire Department official as "suspicious," gutted a 92-year-old Highland Park house that the city had designated a historic-cultural landmark earlier this year over the objection of its owners.

Fire Department official Pat Marek said the blaze, reported at 2:31 a.m. Friday, was "under investigation."