



KEY WEST

ART & HISTORICAL SOCIETY™

October 8, 2025

Honorable Danise Henriquez, Mayor
Honorable Monica Haskell, City Commissioner, District I
Honorable Samuel Kaufman, City Commissioner, District II
Honorable Donald Lee, City Commissioner, District III
Honorable Lissette Carey, City Commissioner, District IV
Honorable Mary Lou Hoover, City Commissioner, District V
Honorable Aaron Castillo, City Commissioner, District VI
City of Key West
1300 White Street
Key West, Florida 33040

Honorable Mayor Henriquez and City Commissioners,

On behalf of the Key West Art and Historical Society (KWAHS), I am writing in response to Discussion item #51 on City Commission Agenda for October 9. Founded in 1949, KWAHS is one of the oldest non-profit organizations in the Florida Keys, with a mission to preserve and promote the region's unique historic and cultural heritage, including its irreplaceable historic buildings. In the late 1980s, KWAHS undertook a multimillion-dollar restoration and adaptive reuse project to convert the 1891 Custom House, transforming it into the Key West Museum of Art & History. Since opening in 1999, the museum has become a beloved community landmark, housing a significant collection of historical artifacts and artwork, and serving as the Society's headquarters. In addition, KWAHS operates and maintains several other important historic sites: Fort East Martello (1862), the Key West Lighthouse and Keeper's Quarters (1848) and the Tennessee Williams Museum (established 2012).

While the Society has a long-standing awareness of the Diesel Plant and its significance, we were deeply dismayed to see demolition listed as a City recommended option for the historic complex. The Diesel Plant comprises a series of brick structures, with the oldest dating back to 1883. Originally constructed as a gas works facility, it was converted to produce commercial electric power in 1887, just five years after Thomas Edison's pioneering Pearl Street Station began operation in New York City. This makes Key West one of the earliest cities in the United States to adopt commercial electrical power, a remarkable distinction that underscores the site's historical importance. The Diesel Plant remained operational until the early 1950s when the Steam Plant on Trumbo Road became the island's primary power generator.

Neglecting – or worse, demolishing – these historic structures would be a profound disservice to the City of Key West and its residents. It would also stand in direct contradiction to both the City's Comprehensive Plan and Charter. The City's own Mission Statement, "Honoring Our Past and Embracing Our Future for a Better Key West" outlines a clear commitment to preservation,



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stating: “Key West cherishes its rich heritage, evident in our architecture, cultural traditions, and historical landmarks. We pay homage to our past by preserving and showcasing our unique history while embracing innovation and progress for a brighter future.” The proposed demolition flies in the face of these values and sets a troubling precedent for how we treat the very heritage that defines our community.

These words, prominently featured on the City’s own website, reflect a fundamental principle: that the architectural heritage of Key West is essential to the identity, values, and economic vitality of our community. To approve, or even recommend, the demolition of a landmark as historically significant as the Diesel Plant directly contradicts the very values the City of Key West has pledged to uphold. The City’s Comprehensive Plan explicitly prohibits the neglect or demolition of historic structures, particularly on City-owned property. It states:

Policy 1A-1.2.10: Prevent Loss of Historic Structures.

There shall be no loss of historic resources on City-owned properties. Sensitive adaptive re-use of historic structures shall be encouraged as an alternative to demolition. Amended Land Development Regulations shall encourage that historic resources on private property will be protected, preserved, or re-used in a manner sensitive to the historic properties of the site and/or structure.

On September 23, 2025, the City’s Historic Architectural Review Commission (HARC) reviewed Discussion Item #51. During that meeting, every HARC member expressed clear opposition to the proposed demolition. HARC, like the City Commission, is established by the City Charter and is the official body charged with preserving the character and appearance of Key West’s historic districts. This includes oversight of buildings, structures, and properties listed on both the local Register of Historic Places and the National Register of Historic Places. The Commission’s unanimous stance should not be taken lightly; it reflects both professional expertise and a legal mandate to protect our architectural heritage.

We respectfully urge the City Commission to uphold the recommendations of its own Historic Architectural Review Commission and to act in accordance with the guiding principles and core values of the City of Key West. Under no circumstances should the City consider demolishing the historic Diesel Plant. Instead, the City should lead by example, championing the stabilization and adaptive reuse of these buildings through a public-private partnership that benefits the entire community. This is an opportunity to come together around a shared vision of preservation, innovation, and civic pride, not to create further division. Let this be a rallying point for honoring our past while building a better future.



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Key West aspires to be a creative and conscious community, one that values preservation and our shared history. The Key West Art & Historical Society stands ready to meet with City staff and other stakeholders to explore creative alternatives, including public-private partnerships, for the rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of these irreplaceable buildings. As an institution with a proven record of stewardship and preservation, KWAHS is prepared to assist the City in fulfilling its obligation and commitment to protect and preserve its own historic assets.

Sincerely,

Michael F. Gieda
Executive Director



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