February 17, 2026

To the Chairman and Members of the U.S. Commission of Fine Arts:

I am writing to express my opposition to the plans to build a ballroom addition to the White House. It is not the fact of a ballroom that I object to; it is the way that this ballroom has been designed. I am a long-time resident of Washington, DC, a professor emerita of history and historic preservation, and the author of six books on American architectural history. I have a long and deep commitment to historic architecture and its power to explain the past and inform the present.

The White House is, inarguably, the most significant residential building in the United States. Designed purposefully and symbolically, it expressed the hopes of a new nation and an understanding of what the role of the president would be. Its location on its own hill, separate from Congress, articulates the balanced nature of our government. Its siting in the middle of the city suggests its accessibility to those who would petition the president. Its stone walls evoke permanence. Its Neoclassical design projects order, rationality, and dignity, but not opulence.

And its relatively small size is an important part of its symbolism. This was not a palace or a castle but, rather, a house. James Hoban's 1792 design, evoking a gentleman's country house in Ireland, was reduced by a story before construction was completed. The domestic scale of the White House is thus an important aspect to be preserved. Modest in size, the White House should be respected by new construction, not overshadowed.

The proposed ballroom does not defer to the architectural and symbolic masterpiece that is the White House. Four aspects of this are particularly concerning:

Size of the ballroom: A building the exact same height (to the cornice) but three times as large will overshadow the White House. A 10-foot setback is irrelevant given the size of the new building, and the assertion that trees will obscure the building is absurd. There is no guarantee that trees will survive even a year, and certainly not for the life of the new building. Trees are not a design strategy.

Size of the connector: The two-story connector is intrusive and unnecessary. At 40 feet high, it is too tall, too visible, and too obtrusive. The ostensible reason for this second story is so that visitors could enter the White House and proceed through the East Room to the ballroom, but it seems that most visitors would enter through the east side of the ballroom, where adequate security screening would take place. Further, would this not turn the East Room into a hallway? Two of the five windows on the east wall of that room would be removed for the corridor. We have not seen plans that explain the impact on the interior of the White House.

Damage to the White House: The exterior of the White House would also clearly suffer by this enlarged connector. At nearly 40 feet wide, the new second story of the connector will

necessitate removal of the handsome Palladian window in the center of the White House's east wall, as well as an adjacent window (see photo). Because the exterior stone walls date back to the original construction of the White House in the 1790s, unlike much of the rest of the building, the loss of this original fabric would be tragic.

Size of the ballroom interior: The size of the ballroom has not been justified. It would seem that the need to gather 1,000 diners would occur rarely, perhaps only for Inaugural Balls. Most of the time the attendance would be smaller, necessitating the partitioning of the space. The 38-foot-high ceiling of the ballroom would be woefully out of scale for a ballroom half of its length or width.

More time is needed for a careful reconsideration of this project. Constructing a ballroom is possible, but it should be deferential to the White House, not overwhelming. It should be scaled for its realistic uses, not aspirational ones. And it should not destroy any fabric of the White House.

Sincerely,

Alison K. Hoagland