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Landmarks commission still threatening fines if house in historic district isn't worked on once building permit is issued

by [Ted Cox](#), one of the many reporters laid off when Joe Ricketts [shut down DNAINfo and Chicagoist](#) last week. Chicago Cityscape has invited DNAINfo Chicago reporters to continue reporting on some of the zoning, housing, and neighborhood development stories they covered while working for DNAINfo.

The owner of a “rotted” house in the Old Town Triangle Historic District is working under the threat of heavy fines as he tries to put the home in order.

City attorney Greg Janes said at a court hearing Thursday that a building permit on the renovation project at [1720 N Sedgwick St](#) is “pretty close to issuance,” and that once completed “work can commence.”

But how much work can actually be done on the house—which remains open and with parts of the interior exposed to the elements—and how closely it can be restored to its original condition remains to be seen over the next few months.



Left: The house as seen in 2008, photo by the Cook County Assessor's Office; right: The house as seen in spring 2017, photo by Ted Cox.

Ald. Michele Smith ([43rd Ward map](#)) charged when the city first filed charges to halt work on the lot in March that the owner had deliberately left the building exposed in order to claim the need to demolish it and start from scratch.

Yet owner Joseph Younes has maintained that the building, constructed in the late 1800s, "rotted itself," that he and his contractor decided to remove the roof in order to keep the entire structure from collapsing, and that he intends to restore it to its original form.

The house is in the [Old Town Triangle Historic District](#), and Janes called it "historically significant" in remarks before Thursday's hearing.

It's under the purview of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks, [which in July](#) threatened to impose fines of \$1,500 a day for violating the city building code and the preservation guidelines of the Old Town Triangle Historic District. Commissioner James Houlihan got the landmarks board to approve a measure at the July meeting calling for maximum fines to be imposed; he estimated that as of midsummer they could add up to \$150,000.

Janes said before Thursday's hearing that those fines remain in play, even if they have not come up in recent court hearings.

“The fines are leverage,” he said, and will be one of the last issues taken up before the court case is closed.

“Their court fines will be based on their conduct,” Janes said, and how closely Younes and his team can restore it to its original condition.

“If they ruined it, there’s going to be astronomical fines,” Janes, the city attorney, said. “If they did dumb things, which it seems they did, there will be substantial fines.”

Younes was not at Thursday’s hearing. His attorney Hugh Howard has declined comment on the case.

Once the building permit is approved, Younes and his contractor will attempt to restore it, depending on what needs to be done on the foundation and what actually can be done. According to Janes, the court-appointed receiver, CR Realty, will continue to monitor work on the project, as will the city Department of Buildings and the Landmarks Commission.

They’re slated to appear again before Associate Judge Patrice Ball-Reed on January 25, 2018, for a status hearing on how work is progressing.