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THE OPINION OF THE OREGONIAN EDITORIAL BOARD

Leave the house alone

On the gritty southern edge of the transit mall, where Interstate 405 dumps commuters into downtown, stands a lonely vestige of old Portland, the Figo House (named after the owner's dog.)

It's a well-kept example of the Victorian architecture that has almost vanished from the central city. Unlike the last few remaining old houses downtown, such as the lovely but vacant Italianate Morris Marks House on Southwest 12th Avenue, the 1894 Figo house is in good repair and fully occupied, housing the legal practice of owner Randal Acker.

But TriMet thinks it's in the way.

The house at 525 S.W. Jackson Street stands on a rather nondescript block owned partly by TriMet and partly by Portland State University, both of which envision a full-block redevelopment project that will incorporate student housing, classrooms, a light-rail station and a TriMet employee break room. Much of the surrounding area has been

cleared, as Tri-Met acquired various properties and tore them down to make way for the tracks. The Figo House is so isolated by construction work now, it's hard even to reach Acker's office.

It is charming to think that, when the work is done, the Figo House would again be accessible and situated by a busy light-rail station and the state's largest university. But, of course, the transit agency doesn't see it that way. It wants to strip the block of its last shred of historical context and rebuild it to fit its vision of what a transit mall ought to be. And a privately owned law office in a historic house, apparently, isn't included in that vision.

Acker hasn't gotten an offer from TriMet and says he has no intention of leaving the house anyway. But later this month, the agency will unveil a set of options for the block that include the forced acquisition of the Figo House. (Other options will include relocating it or doing nothing.)

Acker is furious at the way the transit agency has proceeded quietly to plot the removal of his house,

even after a 2004 environmental impact statement concluded that the transit work would have minimal impact on his property. At the same time, the State Historic Preservation Office agreed that the house shouldn't be disturbed by the transit project without some undefined measures, such as relocation, to mitigate the changes. But TriMet says subsequent revisions to the light-rail route have put the Figo House in the way. Acker says TriMet's consultant, San Francisco-based URS Corp., told him the State Historic Preservation Office can't stop the agency from condemning his house.

In legal terms, that's true, it can't. But TriMet should not view the city as a mass-transit theme park that can't accommodate dissonant uses, especially one as historically significant and currently vibrant as the Figo House. The house is in fine condition, and its owner doesn't want to sell. In 2004, the transit agency led him to believe he wouldn't have to. That ought to be the final word on the matter.