



CITY OF LAS CRUCES

TO: Historic Preservation Committee

FROM: Caitlin Beesley, MHP, Historic Preservation Specialist

DATE: July 10, 2025

SUBJECT: Demolition of unoccupied residence at 414 E. May Avenue

City of Las Cruces is proposing demolition of derelict and vacant property at 414 E. May Avenue at the request of the owner of the adjacent residence at 422 E. May Avenue; the two residences are attached via a party wall. Subject properties are located within the South Mesquite Overlay District; the west unit, 414 E. May, encompasses approximately .11 acres and is zoned NH-1-Urban.

BACKGROUND

Residence at 414 E. May Avenue is a row house, adjoining the residence at 422 E. May Avenue via a party wall to the east. The east half of the structure, the residence at 422 E. May, is constructed in a similar style and is currently occupied by its owner, Ms. Doris Buchmann; 414 E. May is vacant and has no certificate of occupancy and no owner has been identified – the property has been vacant since 1984, leading to severe deterioration of the south-half of the structure's west unit and the collapse of the building's roof. The roof collapse led to the exposure of portions of adobe walls, which are deteriorating and subsequently causing the delamination of plaster. Chunks of plaster have broken off and fallen in the backyard of 422 E. May. The adobe walls, meanwhile, are melting at a rate commensurate with the loss of a roof within the past 12 months; puddled adobe mix from the walls has raised the elevation of the floor in the structure in several areas. At least one instance of looting has occurred on site with vandals attempting to remove pieces of metal from the property, leading to the collapse of one room in the southeast corner of the building; the rear of this room acts as a privacy wall for the backyard of 422 E. May.

This deterioration has the potential to further damage the occupied unit at 422 E. May, in addition to causing severe distress to Ms. Buchmann, the occupant and owner. At the request of Ms. Buchmann, the city contracted for a structural assessment, which found that the integrity of the conjoined structures was at risk – leading the city to propose demolition of the vacant and deteriorated unit at 414 E. May to salvage the occupied unit at 422 E. May. The subject property is located within the South Mesquite Overlay District, encompasses approximately .11 acres.

The city is seeking to demolish the structure, which features adobe construction, originally completed in 1915. City inspectors and members of the Harder Structural Engineering team have taken recent photographs of damage to the exterior and interior of the building following almost 40 years of vacancy and several years of vagrant occupancy by members of Las Cruces' unhoused population. Several fires have been set in various rooms of the property, leading to fire damage to the roof and wood elements of the

construction. The fires were adjacent to a casita located in 422 E. May's backyard, and perpendicular to the occupant's bedroom.

Both properties are located inside the Original Townsite Historic District and within the South Mesquite Overlay District (SMO); they are also contributing resources in the Historic District's National Register listing, meaning their placement in the neighborhood is important to the historic district's significance and continued use is essential to conveying the neighborhood's history. As a building included as part of a historic district in the National Register of Historic Places, 414 E. May rises to a level of significance that would typically discourage alteration and demolition. Its loss would be detrimental to the historic district's nomination, but more specifically to the people who remain in the neighborhood and want to see its historic, community-oriented character continue.

DECISION CRITERIA

Responding to a request for demolition in the instance of 414 E. May would normally depend on several things established in Sec. 35-2, F of the City's Development Code: first, the property's historic, architectural, cultural, and aesthetic significance; second, whether the removal of the property will result in a detriment to the public interest based on its historical importance and architectural value; third, the extent to which its retention would be of economic value, attract tourists, educate citizens regarding the city's heritage, or make the city a more attractive and desirable place to live. Conversely, the property's structural soundness and integrity of structure comparative to the economic feasibility of its restoration and rehabilitation, and the property's threat to public health will also be considered.¹ This will be addressed below; associated photos are located in the attachments section.

Under usual circumstances, the Historic Preservation Committee's decision would be predicated on protecting the historic character of the neighborhood, related to proposed demolitions. Consideration would typically be made regarding alternative options and actions when reviewing applications seeking the demolition or partial demolition of designated cultural properties, as stated in the 2025 Realize Development Code, approved in February 2025 and upheld in May 2025.² In those instances, the approval process of a demolition permit would involve the property owner submitting an appropriate application with applicable documentation, as written in Sec. 35-3 C-3B of the Realize Development Code.³ Consideration would also be made regarding future use of the site. According to Sec. 35-3 C-2, deconstruction of a historic property will be considered only when all other redevelopment options for a building, structure, object or site have been exhausted.⁴ In order for demolition to be granted, plans for new construction would need

¹ City of Las Cruces, "Standards for Requests for Demolition," Realize Development Code Sec. 35-2 F-4, February 18, 2025, 76.

² City of Las Cruces, "Standards for Demolition Request Review," Realize Development Code Sec. 35-3 C-4, February 18, 2025, 84; City of Las Cruces, "Duties and Responsibilities of the Historic Preservation Committee," Realize Development Code Sec. 35-2 B-8, February 18, 2025, 65.

³ City of Las Cruces, "Procedure for the demolition of designated cultural properties," Realize Development Code Sec. 35-3 C-3, February 18, 2025, 81.

⁴ City of Las Cruces, "Demolition of Cultural Properties," Realize Development Code Sec. 35-3 C-2, February 18, 2025, 80.

to be produced to demonstrate continued use of the property; demolition followed by a long-term empty lot is not generally an option for historic districts. Alternative options would also be considered, including the property's sale to someone interested in restoring it.

The circumstances surrounding the property at 414 E. May Avenue are not usual for several reasons, leading to a disjointed approval process. There is no identifiable owner for the property at 414 E. May Avenue; the last known owner that lived on the property was Maria C. Armijo, who passed on February 16, 1984.⁵ Armijo's three children, Tomasa A. Cabrera, Magdalena A. Eres, and Antonio C. Armijo, became owners of the property via probate in 1989; all three are deceased and the property has not gone through probate a second time with the remaining Armijo family members.⁶ Lorena Eres, a granddaughter of Eres, was paying property tax on the lot up until June 26, 2023.⁷ A grandson of Armijo's, Emmanuel Lopez, had previously expressed an interest in restoring the property. Neighbor Doris Buchmann considered purchasing the property from the Armijo family to restore it with the help of a local contractor. In both instances, the issue of required probate was either insurmountable or unattractive for family members and the process was not initiated.

The property has been vacant since Maria Armijo's death, allowing the building to deteriorate to the point that the property was labeled as substandard by city inspectors for reasons stemming from excessive structural failure, electrical hazards, inoperative plumbing, inoperative heating and cooling, and impeded egress from rooms owing to structural failure. The property's abandoned state has also allowed members of the unhoused population unfettered access, and in some instances, trespassing people have moved items in and around the property, damaged the property through attempts to salvage materials, and left paraphernalia and drug-related items scattered around the lot. The City of Las Cruces condemned the property on September 25, 2024, and sent several letters to the Armijo family regarding the property's condition; the Certificate of Occupancy was revoked at the same time the property was condemned.⁸

Efforts are currently being made to ascertain the feasibility of material salvage from the property; due to structural failure and drug paraphernalia, accessing the site is dangerous, and an assessment of the condition of adobe bricks, melted adobe materials, and structural elements including wood or concrete beams would be potentially hazardous. City staff are working to assess the potential for salvage. At least one resident has expressed interest in reusing adobe mix from the property but is non-committal to salvaging and storing materials until an assessment can be made and more information is forthcoming. Legal courses of action regarding salvage and a future contractor's Right of First Refusal will also be discussed.

⁵ Find a Grave, Maria C. Armijo, ID no. 8528881, last updated March 18, 2004.

<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/8528881/maria-c-armijo>

⁶ Dona Ana County Assessor's Office, 414 E. May Ave, Account Information, Transfers.

<https://assessor.donaanacounty.org/assessor/taxweb/account.jsp?accountNum=R0206306>

⁷ Ismael Molina, 414 E. May Ave, Nuisance Abatement Team Property Report, July 1, 2024. See attached report.

⁸ Ibid.

At present, there are no plans for the future of the site beyond demolition due to the unresolved issue of ownership. The City will place a lien against the property, recouping any expense involved in demolition off a prospective future sale of the property, should the issue of ownership ever be resolved. A comparison of cost of demolition against cost of repairs has not been quantified. Given the extent of disrepair, costs to reconstruct the property, following Secretary of Interior Standards, would likely start at \$200,000.⁹

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

The City's historic preservation specialist has reviewed this request and recommends **APPROVAL** of the demolition at 414 E. May Avenue, given consideration for the severity of the situation and potential for damage to the property at 422 E. May, should immediate action not be taken. The attachments identified above are provided and should be included in any consideration or future discussion of the request.

NOTE: Decisions by the Committee must be based on "findings." Findings for *REJECTION* should be articulated by the Committee and may be based on policies of the Elevate Las Cruces Comprehensive Plan, purposes of the Overlay District, the Historic Preservation Ordinance, policies of the Mesquite Neighborhood Plan and/or South Mesquite Neighborhood Design Plan, or other City Plans and policies. Findings may also be based on information presented at the public hearing or information obtained through a site inspection.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Aerial Map
2. Photos

⁹ For more information on reconstruction standards, please follow this link:
<https://www.nps.gov/orgs/1739/upload/treatment-guidelines-2017-part2-reconstruction-restoration.pdf>

ATTACHMENT 1
AERIAL MAP



ATTACHMENT 2 PHOTOS OF DAMAGE



Figure 1: Front façade of 414 E. May Avenue. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 2: Party wall between 422 E. May and 414 E. May. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 3:Roof of party wall between 422 E. May and 414 E. May. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 4: Side access to rear of property at 414 E. May. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 5:Garbage and hazards on ground along side access to property. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 6: Makeshift crack pipe on ground along side access to property. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 7: Condition of south façade of property, with collapsed ceiling and roof structure. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 8: Collapsed roof and melted adobe mix on south façade of property. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 9: Detail of collapsed roof and wall support structure. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 10: Detail of collapsed roof and wall structure. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 11: Photo of collapsed roof at 414 E. May from the roof on 422 E. May. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 12: View of the wall to the rear of the 414 E. May property that acts as a privacy wall for the property at 422 E. May. Photo taken from the roof of 422 E. May. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 13: Photo of Collapsed roof, south facade at 414 E. May. Photo taken July 1, 2025.



Figure 14: Chunks of plaster that have fallen from the rear of property at 414 E. May into the property at 422 E. May. Photo taken July 9, 2025.



Figure 15: 422 E. May property owner and occupant Doris Buchmann illustrating how much the parapet of the roof had moved in the week between the assessments on July 1 and on July 9, following heavy rains. Photo taken July 9, 2025.