

November 20, 2025

Phil Murphy, Governor
Office of the Governor
P.O. Box 001
Trenton, New Jersey 08625

Dear Governor Murphy:

I write as a historian, architectural historian, preservationist, and long-time supporter of your administration. You campaigned on a promise to enact a tax incentive to promote the rehabilitation of historic buildings, and you delivered.

In Asbury Park, a once-down but now reviving city on the Jersey Shore, one of its landmarks that was not rehabilitated was Palace Amusements, which the Department of Environmental Protection permitted to be demolished in 2004. To preservationists such as myself, the loss of any historic property listed on the New Jersey and National Registers of Historic Places, such as the Palace, was and is painful. When a piece of history is destroyed, the loss severs a sense of place and heritage.

Today, twenty-one years after demolition, the sense of loss is compounded by failure of DEP officials to enforce explicit conditions imposed on developers in 2004. Which is why I write to implore you to require DEP to fully enforce the terms embodied in CAFRA Permit #1303-03-0001.2.

The permit included a binding condition requiring the use of iconic artifacts removed from the Palace which were to be returned to the public on a new waterfront building. The new building, which was supposed to be either a hotel or retail building constructed where the Palace had stood for 110 years, would connect historic eras to future generations.

To ensure the availability of the artifacts for public display, the permit turned over the artifacts to local developers, who were directed to "preserve" and "reuse" them. There would have been an undeniable public benefit in so doing. Yet that has not happened. Instead, twenty-one years later, the surviving artifacts -- three wall murals, twenty-five metal channel letters, a wooden cutout, and two signs -- remain in storage, out of public view.

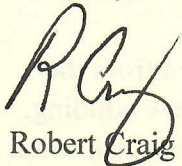
As used in the permit, the term "preserved" means more than just being placed in storage; it means being kept safe from damage or deterioration. Twice, and most recently in 2016, an independent, third-party conservator inspected the artifacts in their storage environments. His report chronicled degradation of the artifacts, more severe, he said, than during his previous inspection just two years earlier. The murals, composed of paint on high density cinder blocks, had suffered significant paint loss. The letters, composed of steel, had rusted. The artifacts, he wrote, were in danger of losing visual integrity.

Allowing this damage to occur is a violation of the permit conditions. If allowed to continue, without professional conservation and repair treatment, the danger to the artifacts will continue to accelerate. Furthermore, these violations will undermine State authority and encourage holders of future permits to ignore conditions that are designed to protect important historical resources. For those responsible for the care and preservation of the artifacts, failure of the State to enforce the permit has dramatically increased the eventual cost of the professional conservation and repair treatments required before the artifacts can be exhibited, as they are required to do.

The loss of the Palace is still deeply felt by residents and tourists alike who embrace Asbury Park's contributions to the history of the Jersey Shore. To fans of Bruce Springsteen, it was equally painful. Springsteen's lyrics tell the stories of real-life places in Asbury Park, especially the Palace, now gone. The arcade's Tillie wall mural, created as a tribute to Coney Island impresario George Cornelius Tilyou, was considered to be Asbury Park most famous icon. Visit shops in Asbury and surrounding communities, and you'll find Tillie-themed merchandise.

Twenty-one years have now passed since the issuance of that permit. ***It is shameful that the permit conditions have not been fulfilled in all that time, and that the State remains on the sidelines, complicit in the degradation and decay.*** By acting now, you can restore public confidence that when the DEP imposes permit conditions, it will insist upon them, and enforce them.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "RC" or "Robert Craig", written in a cursive, stylized manner.

Robert Craig
Hamilton, NJ

c: Bob Crane, Save Tillie, Inc.