




OFFICE OF THE MAYOR
LA CROSSE

MEMO

TO: La Crosse Common Council Members

FROM: Mitch Reynolds--Mayor 

DATE: 7 January 2023

RE: Legistar No.: 22-1426, Resolution regarding disposition of 1607 North St.

A significant amount of disinformation has been widely disseminated in relation to the disposition of the city-owned property at 1607 North St. in La Crosse, formerly under lease to the Harry J. Olson organization.

One of the most egregiously incorrect and ongoing claims is that the La Crosse Common Council has previously agreed to sell the 1607 North St. building to the Harry J. Olson organization. That is not true. The most recent action taken by the council related to the building in January of 2016 was a lease renewal (Res. #15-1219). The council has never agreed to sell the building to the Harry J. Olson organization for \$1. Any claim by the organization's representatives to the contrary is meant to mislead.

Another incorrect claim is that there has been some previous agreement in place that has been changed by the city. That claim is also not true. The very first proposal to convey the property to the Harry J. Olson organization for the nominal \$1 amount came from the city in 2021. I directed staff to create such a proposal and did so nine days after taking office in April of 2021. There were conditions attached to the proposed agreement that were in place to protect the investment La Crosse taxpayers have made in the building over several decades. I later directed staff to make significant concessions to the agreement as part of a good faith negotiation process. That later \$1 proposal was offered to representatives of the organization in May of 2022. That proposal was rejected. To be clear, the intention to sell the building at 1607 North St. to the Harry J. Olson organization for \$1 was never a question. Harry J. Olson representatives have aimed to dictate the terms of, in essence, a very significant taxpayer donation to a private

organization. All claims that are offered by the organization's representatives to the contrary are false and meant to mislead.

Another assertion is that the private Harry J. Olson organization is the only operation of significance offering meaningful senior programming in La Crosse. Again, this is a false allegation meant to mislead the public. The city budgets approximately \$250,000 annually to provide programming for seniors at multiple locations through the Parks & Recreation department. The La Crosse Library also provides significant programming for seniors. Many hundreds of senior citizens take advantage of these programs. To suggest that all of this somehow lacks immense positive impact on the social, mental, and physical health of those who take advantage is not only incorrect but also demeaning and denigrating to city staff who devote their time, effort, and passion towards staffing and improving these programs.

These are just some of the more significant false claims made in relation to the building at 1607 North St. It is unfortunate that local news media have largely avoided a comprehensive evaluation of any of the Harry J. Olson organization's numerous erroneous assertions but have chosen to mostly echo any and all of the organization's claims regardless of veracity.

Harry J. Olson operates as a private organization charging an annual membership fee to serve a unique number of individuals from a historically wide geographic area in a city-owned public facility. The organization insists on dictating terms under which the city will essentially donate the property to the group. Organization representatives have been engaged in an ongoing misinformation campaign meant to publicly pressure the city council to bend to terms it is demanding for this property conveyance. Regardless of direction the city council ultimately takes on this issue, I feel it is important for council members to be aware of some of the falsehoods that have been propagated as part of the ongoing negotiation process.