



Special Collections, Murphy Library

University of Wisconsin-La Crosse

June 5, 2020

City Plan Commission
City of La Crosse, Wisconsin
400 La Crosse Street
La Crosse, WI 54601

Dear City Plan Commission,

I am writing this letter in support of *Hear, Here: Voices of Downtown La Crosse*, to advocate that the City of La Crosse contribute part of the funds needed to sustain the project for two additional years. *Hear, Here*, is a valuable public history project that connects residents to the past in a creative and innovative way. Its orange-colored street signs throughout downtown provide both citizens and visitors alike, easy and instant access to engaging first-person histories about the very place they stand via a toll-free telephone number. This visible and interactive public history project makes La Crosse stand out positively to visiting tourists, reaching callers from all fifty states, and inspires citizens to reshape their perceptions of familiar places.

As an archivist at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse (UWL) Murphy Library Special Collections/Area Research Center (ML SC/ARC), I have been involved with *Hear, Here*, since its inception. ML SC/ARC assists with primary sources and other historic materials for research, illustrative, and public relations purposes. Our archive also houses the UWL Oral History Program (OHP) interviews sourced for the older *Hear, Here*, stories. Furthermore, we are compiling the project's records into a publicly accessible archival manuscript collection, thus ensuring the preservation of this history long into the future. *Hear, Here*, also improves my student instruction, as it is a living example of how historians and citizens can use archival research and materials to initiate beneficial projects for the community.

Hear, Here's, presentation of the city's past through a combination of oral history, poetry, storytelling, photography, and historic research culturally engages both students and the community-at-large. It incorporates a variety of local partners (far too many to list), promotes interdisciplinary cooperation, as well as fosters connections with artists, poets, public schools, community leaders, scholars, and academics, sometimes worldwide. Citizens can also submit their own stories for inclusion in the project by phone or through the website. Additionally, *Hear, Here*, generates walking tours, art exhibits, social media posts, and K-12 programming, and it participates at various area events (such as Global Initiatives Week, Bike Fest, Artspire, PRIDE, La Crosse Reads, and Downtown History Day). The number of entities contributing and connected to this project is indicative of its mass appeal, cultural value, and impact, and thus its success and worthiness for continuation.

Hear, Here, strengthens connections between the university and community in multiple ways. It provides a truly transformative learning experience, providing participating undergraduates with a unique combination of theoretical knowledge and practical experience. Skills that assist them in their future studies and make them more attractive to prospective employers. In my interactions in ML SC/ARC, students often remark on the impact the project has on the city. Specifically, how it fosters a greater understanding of others and promotes a more careful analysis of the past. Through *Hear, Here*, students see firsthand how a community project can advocate for positive change and social justice. I have noticed that they put in extra effort and

take great pride in their work because it is so public and meaningful to the city. Students involved with the project often take visiting friends and family to experience it. Participating in *Hear, Here*, familiarizes students with the city and its concerns, and they become more integrated into our community. Even students without an active role in *Hear, Here*, benefit from the project as listeners. The stories help them learn about and feel invested in La Crosse. Thus, facilitating their yearly transition into the community and discouraging them from having a temporary-citizen-only mindset. *Hear, Here*, has also informed and encouraged residents to contact ML SC/ARC for resources related to local history, sometimes leading to a greater preservation of records and buildings in the city.

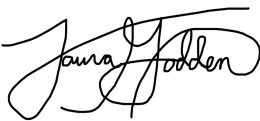
Hear, Here, stories contain a mix of voices from both the present and past, and they incorporate topics related to historically-underrepresented groups. The importance of promoting and understanding diversity in the community has only become more evident with recent events in Minneapolis. Not too long ago, *Hear, Here*, facilitated the donation of a historical run of a local LGBTQ+ newsletter to the ML SC/ARC archives. This donation greatly contributed to the preservation of diverse voices in the city's historical record. Unfortunately, these voices are often missing in archives, sometimes due to the intentional efforts of those in the past. Sustaining *Hear, Here*, would serve as a significant and visible reconciliation on the part of the city to help heal, apologize, and improve upon its sundown town legacy.

Hear, Here, adds readably approachable cultural interest points to the downtown cityscape. Cleverly combining the city's past with creative endeavors, it provides a truly unique and historically rich educational experience. It also increases the public accessibility of archival resources, and it documents and preserves the experiences of historically-underrepresented people. The project has earned enthusiastic and positive feedback from community members, students, tourists, and the press. It even received the nationally prestigious Leadership in History Award from the American Association of State and Local History (AASLH), the most prestigious national recognition for this history specialization.

I genuinely hope that the City of La Crosse chooses to invest in the extension of this worthwhile endeavor. History professor Ariel Beaujot, her students, and the numerous community partners and supporters have devoted an immense amount of time and effort to *Hear, Here*, providing a great gift to the people of La Crosse. Ensuring the continuation of the project would not only respect their dedication but would also foster a supportive atmosphere to encourage future development of public history projects.

Thank you so much for your time and consideration. If you have any questions or would like any further details, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Laura Godden, MA, MLIS
Historian // Archivist // Academic Librarian