

To: City of La Crosse Common Council members

From: Barbara Kooiman, 1932 Cass St., La Crosse, WI

Date: July 11, 2024

Re: Common Council Meeting Agenda #24-0871: Appeal by Mayor Mitch Reynolds for City of La Crosse of the Heritage Preservation Commission designation of historical structure for the building located at 1307 16th St. S. (South Branch Public Library building).

Esteemed Mayor and Council,

Some of you know me, others do not. I have lived in La Crosse since 1991, when I moved here to take a job as an architectural historian/historic preservation professional with a private historical research company. Since living in La Crosse I have been a commission member and sometimes chair of the La Crosse Heritage Preservation Commission; commission member and sometimes chair of the La Crosse County Historic Sites Preservation Commission; and board member and president of Preservation Alliance of La Crosse (PAL). As a professional architectural historian I have written numerous National Register of Historic Places nominations in several states, and have written and participated in writing several local landmark nominations for both the city and the county. So I am very familiar with the function of the City HPC and the criteria they are required to use in designating historic properties in our city.

The Heritage Preservation Commission majority voted on May 23, 2024 to designate the South Branch Public Library at 1307 16th St. S. as a local historic landmark based on all four of the criteria categories under which a property can be designated. And on June 17, 2024 Mayor Mitch Reynolds filed an appeal of the decision to designate the former South Branch Library as a local landmark, effectively asking the Common Council to rescind the historic designation based on his interpretation of the Heritage Preservation ordinance that the HPC did not adequately make their arguments concerning the historical significance of the building.

I apologize for wading into this at the last minute, but this is not an easy argument on either side. Nomination author David Riel makes the argument that the South Branch Library, built in 1952, meets all four criteria of the Heritage Preservation ordinance. Keep in mind, a building could meet the threshold for historic designation if only ONE (or more) of the historic criteria is/are met. Meeting all four criteria is not necessary. Mayor Reynolds is arguing that the building did not meet ANY of the four criteria. My reading of the nomination and experience with applying the criteria falls somewhere in between.

The physical integrity of the building has issues with the addition of the 1993 hipped roof. The building was designed with a flat roof. For whatever reasons, the city chose to put a hipped roof on the building about 40 years after the building was constructed. However, that does affect the overall appearance of the building, and thus the historic integrity of the building. It effectively changes the building from having a somewhat International Style appearance to a more Prairie School Style appearance, which does not seem to be the intention of the architect. So, that is

an issue, and thus I do not believe that the building should be nominated under the “architecture” criterion.

The author argues that the building is significant as “representative of the notable work of a master building or architect....” Though architect Frank Fuchs certainly designed several fairly well known buildings in our city and is a notable local architect in La Crosse, it could be argued that this building is not necessarily the best representative of his work, mostly because of the alteration from his original design with the 1993 addition of the hipped roof design.

The author also does not make a strong case under the criterion of the Library being “identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state or local history.”

HOWEVER, I do believe that a strong case could be made for the Library meeting the Historic Preservation Ordinance criterion to “exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state or community.” I agree with the Mayor’s statement that this could be a fairly subjective criterion to argue, however, public buildings such as libraries are frequently considered to be historically significant to their communities. They provide educational resources, meeting places, community hubs and in a city such as La Crosse, the history bears this out with the city’s intent in the early 20th century to build branch libraries on both the North and South sides of the city. Author Riel does a good job of outlining the city’s efforts to build both branch libraries, and their delays due to early to mid-20th century economic downturns and war-time deferred schedules, but both libraries were finally built because of the need of the city’s residents and dedication of the city government.

Ultimately, from what I understand is that Mayor Reynolds has requested this appeal because he feels that the nomination may have been accepted by the HPC even though, in his interpretation of the ordinance, the building did not meet (any of) the criteria for historic designation. I take this to mean that he is very much in favor of the historic nomination process, but in his opinion, that process was not strictly applied. And though his appeal may appear or feel like a negative, overall he is wanting the historic nomination process to retain integrity, and that buildings should be designated by the HPC under a more stringent application and interpretation of the criteria.

I appreciate that sentiment. Therefore I wonder if one solution here is not the complete appeal/rescinding of this building’s historic designation. Rather that the HPC takes the nomination back, and with further research, documentation and rewriting, the nomination focus on the ONE criterion to “exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state or community.” This does not need to be an all or nothing decision.

Initially I wondered why the Mayor would take the time to file this appeal himself. In the 30 plus years I’ve been working with historic preservation issues in La Crosse, I have never seen a mayor take this level of interest or action on an HPC matter. However, this IS a city-owned

building and there has been some neighborhood/citizen concerns about the future of this building, so his additional attention to this particular designation makes sense in that context.

We all need to remember that even though local historic designation can be used as a tool to help protect a locally landmarked building from demolition, that can't be the reason for its historic designation. The HPC, the Common Council and the Mayor all need to keep the historic preservation ordinance in mind when considering these historic designations. The building must meet the historic criteria outlined in the ordinance. Emotional, economic and possible demolition concerns cannot be part of the argument for historic designation.

Please consider, if possible, my proposed solution.... To allow the HPC to take the nomination back to the drawing board, and re-submit a nomination that clearly and concisely makes the argument for the building's requirement to "exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic, or social history of the nation, state or community." My professional opinion is that it does, and with those edits, can and should be designated as a La Crosse city landmark.

Respectfully submitted,
Barbara Kooiman
Architectural Historian/Historic Preservation Consultant