

Craig, Sondra

From: Aaron Engel <aengel@lacrossesd.org>
Sent: Thursday, July 11, 2024 4:10 PM
Subject: Support for Mayor Reynolds Appeal
Attachments: Letter of Support for Mayor Reynolds Appeal - 20240711.pdf

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Dear City Council Members,

Thank you for your dedicated service to our community. I appreciate the vast array of challenging issues you address on behalf of our citizens and am thankful that you have stepped up to serve our City. I know there are no easy decisions and that you are doing your best to balance the various needs of your constituents.

I support Mayor Mitch Reynolds' appeal of the historic site designation of the South Branch Library. The South Branch Library site does not meet any of the four criteria listed in Section 20.90 of the Municipal Code of Ordinances for historic site designation and the ordinance by which the City designates historic sites is unfair, stifles economic development within the City and negatively impacts property owners.

Please see the attached letter of support that outlines these arguments in more detail. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Aaron J. J. Engel, Ph.D.

Superintendent

School District of La Crosse

807 East Avenue South, La Crosse, WI 54601

Phone: 608.789.7628 | Fax: 608.789.7960

aengel@lacrossesd.org



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF LA CROSSE

807 East Avenue South • La Crosse, WI 54601 • 608.789.7628 • Fax: 608.789.7604

TO: City Council Members
FROM: Aaron Engel, Superintendent
DATE: July 11, 2024
SUBJECT: Support of Mayor Mitch Reynolds Appeal of the Historic Site Designation of the South Branch Library

I support Mayor Mitch Reynolds appeal of the historic site designation of the South Branch Library. The South Branch Library site does not meet any of the four criteria listed in Section 20.90 of the Municipal Code of Ordinances for historic site designation and the ordinance by which the City designates historic sites is unfair, stifles economic development within the City and negatively impacts property owners.

Criteria - No Significant Contribution, Does not Reflect Broader Trends

There is no reference of the South Branch Library in the summary historical records of our City of any significant contribution or reflection on the broader trends in our city, State or Nation.

A search of the online La Crosse Library archives yields only three entries that mention the South Branch Library. The first¹ and second² references, describe the creation and history of the South Branch Library and the third³ reference merely identifies the South Branch Library in the acquisitions information. These three references do not identify any significant contribution of the South Branch Library to the history, heritage, or culture of the City of La Crosse, the County of La Crosse, the State of Wisconsin, or the United States.

The publication of the La Crosse Historical Society, *A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin in the Twentieth Century: Reinventing La Crosse Again and Again*, written by Susan T. Hessel and Gayda Hollnagel, published in 2007, also identifies no significant contribution of the South Branch Library to the history, heritage, or culture of the City of La Crosse, the County of La Crosse, the State of Wisconsin, or the United States.

Criteria - No Distinguishing Characteristics

There is no original architectural distinguishing characteristic of the South Branch Library.

The archives website for the La Crosse Public Library has a post titled: 30 Years of Library Service⁴, that outlines the history of the La Crosse Public Library. In this archives post, it is stated that, "In 1993 the building was remodeled and transformed from a post-World War II bland building to a Prairie style functional facility." When built, the architectural style was "a post-World War II bland building," not intended to follow the Prairie style. Only the addition of a

¹ <https://archives.lacrosselibrary.org/blog/130-years-of-library-service/>

² <https://archives.lacrosselibrary.org/collections/public-records/la-crosse-series-008/>

³ <https://archives.lacrosselibrary.org/collections/heritage-and-lifestyles/mss-a/>

⁴ <https://archives.lacrosselibrary.org/blog/130-years-of-library-service/>

roof, added 41 years after its construction, created the impression of a particular architectural style.

Criteria - Not a Notable Work of a Master Architect

While Frank J. Fuchs worked in La Crosse, he was not a master architect nor was the South Branch Library a notable work of his.

While the designer of the South Branch Library, Frank J. Fuchs, was a local architect who designed buildings, there is no individual work of his of any significance. An online search of "Frank J. Fuchs" yields an obituary and some letters of his regarding his service in the Army during WWII located at the Wisconsin Historical Society. There are no results that reference any particular architectural work of his nor reference his skill as that beyond the average architect of the time. The one building of note in his catalog is the Mary E. Sawyer Auditorium which was erected and then torn down after just 34 years⁵, an indication of the limited importance of that building and its design to the community.

I do not believe in requesting the rejection of the work and decisions of well-intentioned hard working public servants without also providing solutions to consider. Below are a few more concerns about the process and ordinance considerations to improve historic designation.

Ordinance - Notice to Property Owners

Change the ordinance to extend the timeline and ensure property owners are notified in a more expansive manner about the process and designation.

In reading the ordinance, it is concerning to me that a historic designation can occur without any communication with or agreement by the property owner aside from a single 20 day notice sent by certified mail of a final hearing from the Commission. It is unreasonable that a property owner gets just 20 days of notification for a designation that could significantly impact the value of their property or their right to modify their property and improve their financial asset.

Ordinance - Stifling Economic Development

Change the ordinance to extend the timeline and change the process by which buildings are designated as historic sites.

This process by which buildings are designated historic sites stifles economic development in the City. The uncertain nature and accelerated timeline of historic site designations limits the investment potential property owners are willing to make within the City. At any time a building a property owner has, a building that is being sold, or a building that is being purchased may be nominated as historic by any person and designated historic by the Commission in just 20 days. Clearly this has a chilling effect on investment in property in the City.

⁵ <https://www.wisconsinhistory.org/Records/Property/HI33898>

Ordinance - Negatively Impacts Property Owners

Change the ordinance to limit when buildings may be designated as historic.

When the School District of La Crosse decided to sell the Lincoln Middle School, we had interest from seven different potential buyers. Upon the City's designation of the property as historic we had multiple potential buyers indicate that because of the designation they were no longer interested in purchasing the property. The request for proposal process resulted in just one acceptable bid. The historic designation limited the potential buyers, created a lack of competition for the property, and likely negatively impacted the purchase price of the property.

Property owners across the City should be concerned about the historic designation process as it may very well negatively impact their ability to receive the maximum return on their investment. In fact this process could intentionally be used to undermine the acquisition process to prevent others from acquiring property or to ensure their own acquisition of property at a lower than market value rate.