



## Memorandum

To: Common Council  
From: Tim Acklin, AICP, Planning Manager  
CC: Mayor Mitch Reynolds  
Date: **July 11, 2023**  
Re: **Abraham Lincoln Junior High Local Landmark Designation**  
**Legistar #23-0618 & #23-0767**

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This memo is in response to the appeal, by the La Crosse School District, of the Heritage Preservation Commission's (HPC) designation of the Abraham Lincoln Middle School (Main/Original Building only) as a local landmark to the Common Council's July 13, 2023, meeting.

### **Process for Local Landmark Status**

[Chapter 20-90](#) of the Municipal Code of Ordinances states that "a historic structure or historic site designation may be placed on any site, natural or improved, including any building, improvement or structure located thereon, or any area of particular historic, architectural or cultural significance to the City of La Crosse" that meet one of the following criteria:

- (1) Exemplify or reflect the broad cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, State or community
- (2) Are identified with historic personages or with important events in national, State or local history
- (3) Embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or of indigenous materials or craftsmanship
- (4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer or architect whose individual genius influenced such master's age.

This section also permits the HPC to create and adopt specific operating guidelines for designating landmarks sites. In accordance with this provision the HPC, along with staff, developed a Landmark Nomination Form that was designed to create a detailed historic record of the property which is used by the HPC when determining if it meets one of the four criteria.

Additionally, determination of historic landmark status requires that it be on the agenda of two (2) meetings of the HPC. Once a nomination is received, it is placed on the next monthly agenda. The deadline for nominations is generally one week prior to the meeting. The property owner is also notified by staff of the meeting if they are not the applicant. That meeting is where the HPC discusses/determines whether the nomination is considered complete or whether it needs additional information to meet the criterion it is being nominated for. The nomination then may

be “referred” for more information or “accepted”. This process is more specifically stated in [Chapter 20-54](#).

If accepted the HPC schedules a public hearing on the nomination at their next monthly meeting. A notice of the public hearing is published in the La Crosse Tribune and a copy of the public notice is mailed to the property owner via Certified Mail. A final decision on the designation of a property as a local landmark is made at this meeting. Appeals of the decision may be made to the Common Council.

### **Nomination by a non-property owner**

Submittal of a nomination of a property or structure to be a local landmark is permitted by any member of the public. Permission of the property owner is not required. Variations of this aspect of the process differs per municipality nationwide. Staff does recommend that an applicant, who is not the property owner, works with the property owner to gain their support.

### **Process/Timeline- Lincoln Middle School**

May 17, 2023- Draft Nomination was submitted to the Planning, Development and Assessment Staff

May 17-18, 2023- Revisions and edits were made between Staff and applicant.

May 18, 2023- Final nomination submitted to staff.

May 23, 2023- Nomination and link to Legistar Item #23-0618 emailed to Dr. Aaron Engel, La Crosse School District Superintendent.

May 25, 2023- HPC Meeting #1 Nomination was accepted.

May 30, 2023- Notice of Public Hearing mailed to La Crosse School District c/o Dr. Aaron Engel via Certified Mail.

June 1, 2023- Notice of Public Hearing published in La Crosse Tribune.

June 22, 2023- HPC #2. Noticed Public Hearing. Designation was approved.

### **Historic Significance**

The Abraham Lincoln Junior High School was determined to be historically significant per the following criteria stated in Section 20-90 of the Municipal Code:

*(3) Embody the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen, inherently valuable for a study of a period, style, method of construction, or of indigenous materials or craftsmanship*

The original structure is considered one of the best examples of the Neo-classical School of Architecture indicative by its flat surfaces, classical ornamented stepped back façade and rusticated base. The push for Neo-classicism was fueled by the Columbian Exposition in 1893, the Richardsonian Romanesque gave way to the Neo-classicism of the "City Beautiful Movement" even in the Midwest and in La Crosse. Relying on Greek models rather than Roman, the Neo-classical Revival of 1900-1920 was best applied to the design of monumentally scaled public buildings such as banks, schools, and civic buildings.

*(4) Are representative of the notable work of a master builder, designer or architect whose individual genius influenced such master's age.*

Abraham Lincoln Junior High School was designed by Otto Merman and built in 1924. He was

responsible for designing several residences and commercial buildings in La Crosse between 1912 and 1935 either by himself or with other prominent architects in the area. Many of his buildings are still in existence.

More information on its history may be found within the submitted nomination.

The City of La Crosse's Architectural and Historic Intensive Survey report, that was completed in 1984 and updated in 1996 and 2018, identified Lincoln Middle School as potentially eligible for the State and National Register of Historic Places. This status is considered the first step in the process of being nominated. A completed nomination would need to be submitted to the Wisconsin Historical Society to complete this process. Listing to the State and National Register of Historic Places would make the property eligible for Federal and State Historic Tax Credits that can be used for restoration/renovation.

### **What Regulation is associated with local designation?**

Properties that are locally landmarked/designated require additional review by the HPC when there are any proposed additions, alterations, or demolitions to its exterior. An applicant looking to make these changes must apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness before a Building Permit is issued by the Community Risk Management Office. Review of plans typically involves evaluating if the changes are appropriate to the building in relation to historic significance. For example, if a building is historically significant for its Prairie School Architecture, review of plans would make sure that the architectural features that are associated with that style are preserved and/or appropriately altered. General best practices from the National Trust for Preservation are referred to and followed.

Additionally, designation offers a layer of protection from demolition. Before a Demolition Permit may be issued a property owner must apply for a Certificate of Appropriateness and submit it to the HPC for approval. Specific criteria for review of these applications by the HPC are provided in [Chapter 20-93](#) of the Municipal Code. It is important to note that landmark designation ensures a more thorough review of demolition proposals, but it does not prohibit demolition outright. It also provides the public an ability to provide public input into the process.

### **Importance of Historic Preservation**

Historic preservation is often defined as the process of identifying, protecting, and enhancing buildings, places, and objects of historical and cultural significance. This process embraces many phases including the survey and evaluation of historical, architectural, and cultural resources in an area and the development of planning and legal measures to protect these resources in the future. This is done to tie a place's history to its population and culture and maintain a tangible physical connection to the past so that these places can be enjoyed by future generations.

Historic Preservation is more than the buildings and sites. Consideration of the historic fabric, which serves as a tangible link to the past, can tell us a lot about the history, culture, and architecture of a particular time and place is important. The historic fabric of a building includes its original materials, design features, decorative finishes, and craftsmanship, which are often unique and irreplaceable. By preserving the historic fabric of a building, we can ensure that future generations can continue to appreciate and learn from it.

According to the [National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) historic preservation strengthens our economy.

- Many recent studies indicate that preservation has positive economic impacts on local job creation. In addition, reusing and retrofitting older buildings stimulates the local economy because labor and materials tends to be obtained locally.
- A vast majority of recent studies show that property values have a tendency to rise within historic districts when compared to a similar non-designated neighborhoods.
- Rehabilitation of historic buildings has been found to attract new private investment to historic downtowns and has thus been critical maintaining the long-term economic health of many communities.
- In January 2012 the Preservation Green Lab, a project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, released *The Greenest Building: Quantifying the Environmental Value of Building Reuse*, which found that in almost every case, the reuse of existing buildings results in fewer environmental impacts over their life spans compared to demolition and new construction. Conserving buildings prevents demolition waste from entering landfills and reduces sprawl by encouraging the revitalization of our existing communities. Further, historic buildings are often more energy efficient than more contemporary buildings due to careful siting choices and the use of passive heating and cooling systems.

Other resources:

[12 Economic Benefits of Historic Preservation](#)

[Sustainability and Historic Preservation](#)

[Historic Preservation and Community Planning](#) (Wisconsin Historical Society)

Generally,

- Older buildings, especially those built prior to World War II, are often made of higher quality materials. Replacing these buildings would be impractical and unaffordable. Newer buildings also tend to have a life expectancy of only 30-40 years, whereas many older buildings were “made to last”. It makes economic sense to retain historic buildings and improve them to meet modern codes and requirements.
- Every community has significant investments in public infrastructure, including roads, sewers, parks and schools. Historic preservation directs development to places where infrastructure is already in place.
- Saving historic buildings and keeping our towns and cities healthy reduces the pressure to pave the countryside. When we reinvest in older neighborhoods, we are reinvesting in inherently sustainable communities that are generally dense, walkable, transit-accessible, and feature mixed-uses.
- Historic preservation creates opportunities for affordable housing. Historic structures are often located close to services and public transportation, reducing transportation costs for residents.

La Crosse is home to many examples of historic buildings that have successfully been adaptively reused. Notable examples outside of the Downtown include the former Roosevelt Elementary School, former Bakalars Building (2219 Lofts), Gund Brewery Lofts, and the Holy Trinity School.

Historic preservation allows us to retain the best of shared heritage to preserve sites of unique quality and beauty, revitalize neighborhoods, spur economic revitalization, and create better communities.

Please contact me at 608-789-7391 if you have any questions.