

**Board of Education**

lacrosseschools.org

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Dear Councilmembers,

I am Annie Baumann, President of the School District of La Crosse Board of Education. I am writing to you today on behalf of the Board of Education for two reasons: first, to encourage you to overturn the historic structure designation of Abraham Lincoln Junior High (main/original building only) which is known locally as Lincoln Middle School, and second to suggest that the ordinance outlining the process for designating historic structures be revised.

**Overturn Historic Designation**

On January 23rd, 2023, the Board of Education voted to close Lincoln Middle School before the beginning of the 2023-24 school year, signaling to the community that sale of the site would be imminent. For two years prior to that decision, the district engaged the community in a long range facility planning process. Throughout the process - whether communicating with the larger community, the city council, or the city planning department - school district administrators expressed the need to consolidate our schools to continue providing a high quality education while facing budget shortfalls due to decreasing enrollment, increasing costs of building maintenance, and historically inadequate state funding for public education. However, a mere few weeks before publishing a Request for Qualifications (RFQs) and two years after the district began engaging the community in long range facility planning, the Historic Preservation Commission has voted to designate Lincoln Middle School as a historic structure.

In the months since the vote to close Lincoln Middle School, the district partnered with ISG, a local architecture and engineering firm, to engage the community in a series of feedback sessions to envision the future of the Lincoln Middle School site. The ideas, dreams, and visions shared by community members in these sessions has been collected with the intention of providing the board criteria to judge what the community could support for the future of the Lincoln site. Housing (of different types, sizes, and affordability) and community spaces (like gyms, meeting and event spaces, and playgrounds) ranked highest on a list of priorities expressed by community members who participated in these sessions. Historic preservation was ranked only 7th of 8 priorities.

While it is true that a developer could meet some of these priorities by renovating the original Lincoln Middle School structure, this late historic designation risks reducing the pool of proposals that the board may choose from and limits the board's ability to meet the hopes and visions shared by community members.

**Historic Preservation Ordinance Revision**

Finally, this late designation has severely impeded the board's ability to perform its statutory duties. As an elected body, the board is charged with the responsibility and authority of managing the school district's properties and affairs, including the sale of district properties. While the board recognizes that the city has the power to designate city buildings, sites, and districts as historic, the lack of interest in designating the Lincoln Middle School building as

historic until the eleventh hour has uncovered a flaw in the ordinance that incidentally limits the board's ability to adequately plan for the future.

Buildings can stand for decades or over a hundred years, but the procedure outlined in the municipal code for designating a historic structure requires a property owner to be given a notice only 20 days prior to a public hearing on the designation. 20 days is an alarmingly insufficient time to allow for property owners of all types - whether homeowners, business owners, or a school district - to plan for the future. For the school district, the execution of the procedure outlined in this ordinance has created an unjust situation that hampers the board's ability to plan for the future of education in La Crosse. The district has many buildings over 50 years old - including 4 over 80 years old - that require significant maintenance. How can the board adequately respond to the present and future needs of our students, staff, and community with this risk of last-hour manipulations?

Please work in partnership with the Board of Education to serve our community by overturning the historic structure designation that the Historic Preservation Commission approved for Lincoln Middle School, and please reconsider the procedure outlined in the municipal ordinance governing historic preservation.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Annie Baumann', with a stylized, flowing script.

Annie Baumann

President  
Board of Education  
School District of La Crosse