



SCHOOL DISTRICT OF LA CROSSE

2405 Travis Street • La Crosse, WI 54601 • 608.789.7628 • Fax: 608.789.7604

Dear Heritage Preservation Commission,

The School District of La Crosse is registering opposition to the historic landmark designation for Emerson Elementary. While the building is old, the programs it housed were not unique, or even a first in La Crosse. The building no longer represents the function it once had and association with the Public Works Administration is insufficient for historic landmark designation.

Emerson Elementary was one of 11 orthopedic schools built across the state of Wisconsin and one of many in the country, and became a common occurrence throughout the first half of the 19th century. In La Crosse, the Emerson location was not even the first site of the orthopedic program, it was originally housed at the Washburn School. The building itself is unremarkable. It is described in the nomination as "typical of the period", "starkness of ornament", and with the additions, exhibiting "a watered down appearance."

The nomination indicates "the historic merit of the building is nested in its function." However, those very programmatic functions are no longer present or visible. The therapy pools, the grab bars, and the circulation paths are gone. The one external feature that made the building special was its one story design. With the second story addition in 1955 and the stairs that were added, even that feature is gone. The physical characteristics that made the building and programming significant are no longer present, and have not been for 71 years.

Finally, the nomination identifies an association with the 1930s Public Works Administration. If this were sufficient for historic landmark status, then other structures in the City, also built with these funds would be historic as well. Yet the Cass Street Bridge and the shelter at Granddad's Bluff, built with Public Works Administration funds, and certainly more iconic for the City, are not identified as historic.

I know your purpose as a commission is to determine *if* something is historic, not if it *should* be. So I won't get into my concerns about economic development, stifling community input, neighborhood revitalization, or the capricious and random nature of this process. I have expressed those concerns to the City in the past, and will again if need be.

In summary, as it relates to Emerson being a historic landmark - the orthopedic program did not begin at Emerson, the program was not significant but common, the building does not exhibit any of the basic features that once made it unique, and it is clear that association with the Public Works Administration is not sufficient to be a historic landmark. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Aaron J. J. Engel, Ph.D.
Superintendent