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To: Members of the Historic Preservation Commission
From: Whitney Gould

I am writing to express my dismay at many of the changes being proposed to Milwaukee's Historic Preservation ordinance by Ald. Terry Witkowski. I say this despite having been a member of the working group assembled by the mayor and the Department of City Development to explore ways of improving the ordinance. While I am speaking only for myself in this letter, I think it is safe to say that some other members of the working group share my concerns and will come forward in the near future. Had we thought that our common interest in updating and refining the 30-year-old ordinance would result in actually weakening it, I think the vast majority of us would never have agreed to serve on the committee.

While I appreciate that Ald. Witkowski incorporated some of our ideas in his draft proposal--notably, the stronger safeguards against demolition by neglect; proof of financing before demolition permits are issued for development on historic sites; a design review by planners within DCD of new construction in historic districts--he has added several other revisions that I fear could gut historic preservation in Milwaukee.

That would not only be a tragedy for the cause of preservation, which is, after all, a vehicle for telling the story of our city: its immigrant roots, its pioneer craftsmen; its visionary architects; its cultural diversity. It would also be a setback for economic development. Many credible studies document how preservation creates jobs, enlarges the tax base, stabilizes neighborhoods and expands tourism. Indeed, preservation should be seen as a form of economic development in its own right.

Moreover, historic properties in Milwaukee, from the grandest mansions to the humblest worker cottages, help reinforce our sense of place--the rich architectural and cultural identity that makes Milwaukee unique. It was that sense of place that helped draw me to this city from Madison almost 30 years ago--and that informed my work at The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel as architecture critic and interpreter of the urban landscape before my retirement in 2007.

As someone who loves her adopted city, I see no sense, for example, in making it harder for citizens to nominate properties for historic designation, as Ald. Witkowski proposes. His \$25 fee might be defensible, I suppose, in a period of tight budgets. But why should nominations be restricted to the property owner, an alderman or a petition by 25 residents? That hurdle seems to assume that the city is inundated with frivolous nominations. It is not. Each nominated property must pass a test of architectural, cultural and/or historic significance. And, while the property owner's voice should always be seriously considered, Ald. Witkowski's proposal makes the broader public interest in saving history through a century or more of owners secondary to the present owner's opinion. Hello, bulldozers.

So, too, does the simplistic mechanism for de-listing historic properties invite the wrecking ball, especially where a single owner has amassed all or most of the properties in a historic district.

Commissioners, please add your voices to a broader effort to slow down the rush to wound a preservation process that has served the city well, for the most part. Yes, that process can and should be improved. But let the public weigh in. They just might come up with better ideas for renewing our city without sacrificing too much of its rich, quirky, messy history.