

MPA

MILWAUKEE
PRESERVATION
ALLIANCE

City of Milwaukee
Historic Preservation Commission
200 E. Wells Street
Milwaukee, WI 53202

February 10, 2017

Re: Humphrey Scottish Rite Masonic Center File #161364

Dear Chair,

Milwaukee Preservation Alliance has reviewed the proposed plans for the Scottish Rite Masonic Center at 790 N. Van Buren St., as put forth by developer Ascendant Holdings. We believe this proposal preserves many key aspects of the historic character of the building, and is certainly preferable to demolition. In addition to preserving the Art Deco façade, we are pleased that the main auditorium space and ceremonial hall space would be retained and restored.

There are a few aspects of the proposal that are cause for concern from a preservation standpoint. Removal of the stained-glass windows on street façades is not preferable or advisable, even if the intent is reuse. In regards to the addition, the undulations in the tower façade and the diagonal bracing system imparts a horizontal reading of the tower, which would conflict with the vertical elements in the historic Art Deco detailing. Opaque vertical elements in the tower would better reflect the appearance of verticality in the stone window bay mullions from the historic building. The use of bronze colored glazing and support elements, however, is a sensitive material choice. MPA is also concerned that the development as proposed could make the building ineligible to remain on the National Register.

In summary, while MPA does have concerns about the sensitivity of the design, we do believe that the structural system proposal for the tower addition is sound, and the intent to retain the theater, ceremonial spaces, and façades is promising. The design of the tower itself can be made more sensitive and less overbearing with some visual alteration. As proposed, the design retains much of the historic character of the building. MPA will not oppose this development as proposed with the understanding that certain historic elements and character defining features must be saved and stained glass windows are restored in place. MPA would like to see the Humphrey Scottish Rite Masonic Center restored. This appears to be the best alternative.