

The Business Journal
August 9, 2017

Paul Weise Furniture building gets temporary historic protections

By Sean Ryan



Legistar

The building was designed by renowned Milwaukee architect Alexander Eschweiler.

Temporary historic protections were approved for the longtime home of Paul Weise Furniture in Milwaukee, but city preservation officials said they will consider the owners' plan to save parts of the building when developing new apartments on the property.

The brick building at North Farwell Avenue and East Albion Street dates back to the early 1900s, and was built for the Weise family. It is the latest in the downtown area to get caught in the balance between preserving history and pursuing new development.

"I grew up in that building as a kid sweeping the floors and a high schooler delivering furniture," said Paul Weise Jr. "We grew up here and we'll retain it, but we just want as much flexibility with the guidelines as we can get."

The Weise family and building owner Steven Stein are drawing up plans to build apartments on the property. They had attempted to secure federal historic tax credits to preserve the existing building, but were denied, Weise said. In late June, they applied for a demolition permit to tear down much of the building, but preserve the signature stone walls facing Farwell and Albion to incorporate into a new apartment development.

The attempt to pull a demolition permit caught the attention of the Milwaukee Preservation Alliance. The alliance petitioned the city to place a temporary historic designation on the building, which sets up additional layers of city approval needed for the building to be demolished or heavily renovated.

On Tuesday, that designation was approved by the city of Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission.

"This temporary historic designation gives an opportunity for the community to hear why the building is important and to have a say," said Dawn McCarthy, past president of the Preservation Alliance.

The designation will set up future hearings for the commission to consider specific redevelopment plans for the Weise property. Members of the commission, and area Ald. Nik Kovac, were open to the concept, but wanted to see details.

"I'm not categorically against modern additions to historic buildings, but the details do matter," Kovac said.

Stein and Weise, at the request of the Historic Preservation Commission members, did not discuss specifics of their proposed building plans during Tuesday's meeting.

"I don't think we're looking to put anything that is going to be monstrous or really overwhelming," Stein said. "It's just enough to make the project work, enough units to make the project work."

The project could veer into the type of regulatory discussions that have been more of an art than a science, but that most recent developments have successfully navigated in Milwaukee. A similar situation occurred at the former Humphrey Scottish Rite Masonic Center in downtown Milwaukee over the past year.

After hearing of efforts to sell the Masonic Center for redevelopment, the Milwaukee Preservation Alliance in spring 2016 asked the city to give it historic protections. That spurred long discussions between developers and the city's historic preservation staff over designs to convert the building into a hotel and build a 14-story glass tower to rise out of its roof.

The Historic Preservation Commission in February approved the tower proposal. The developers are working to get final sign-off from the commission over the future preservation of about 20 stained glass windows in the existing building.