



Office of the City Clerk

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April 26, 2019

RE: Accessibility at historically designated sites

Dear Ms. Alexander:

Alderman Bauman requested that I respond to your recent email from a technical and procedural perspective. Milwaukee's historic districts and properties are designated in order to promote the image of our historic neighborhoods, to increase property values, and to encourage new ownership and awareness of the unique and building stock found in our city. Ultimately, the goal is to preserve the character of all buildings in our historic districts and unique historic properties. Despite common belief, designation as historic property has a negligible impact on accessibility upgrades for designated buildings. Upgrades are a duty to our citizens and are encouraged. These special places need to be available to everyone. The Historic Preservation Commission and its staff regularly approve accessibility upgrades. Recent examples of such approvals are at City Hall, St. John's Lutheran, Christ Polish Baptist Church (Risale Center), Judge Jason Downer House, Uncle Wolfie's Restaurant, and Community Baptist Church.

Historic designation does not exempt a building from Americans with Disabilities Act nor from building codes. There are well-established state and national standards for making accessibility improvements to designated properties by which the City of Milwaukee always abides (e.g., National Park Service's "Preservation Brief 32, Making Historic Properties Accessible"). There are indeed considerations for what is appropriate to a specific site regarding design and materials. For example, a wooden ramp would be out of place on the exterior of a stone building, but one made of materials found on the exterior of the building would be welcomed.

In particular consideration of the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts, most needed accessibility upgrades for the main building are interior. Most entrances are already at grade, but have interior stairs. Interiors are beyond the jurisdiction of Milwaukee's historic preservation ordinance. As to the grounds on the south side of the main building including the Peck Pavilion and the grove of trees, there are many possibilities for modifying the seating area, backstage, and the stage to accommodate performers and patrons with disabilities. Thoughtful design could easily integrate lifts, ramps, assistive audio, and alternative ground surfaces, including accessible gravel systems.

Respectfully,

 Digitally signed by  
Tim Askin  
Date: 2019.04.26  
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