

April 11, 2022

To the honorable Chair and Committee members:

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The Milwaukee Preservation Alliance **strongly urges your support** of permanent historic designation for the Columbia Hospital building at 2015-2025 E. Newport Ave. In weighing the public value of designation and other factors, there are a number of important reasons to move forward with designation of this important place:

- The building has clear historic significance according to the City's established criteria.
- Designation would provide the time necessary for a true public process to determine the most appropriate future for the building and site.
- The building can be restored and put to productive use. Evidence shows time and again that older buildings, including buildings older and in worse condition than this, can be restored to the benefit of the owner and community.
- Demolition is directly counter to the City's and owner's interests in being good stewards of environmental resources.
- Having already spent tens of millions of dollars in purchasing and maintaining the building and larger complex, it is not a responsible use of public funds to erase this investment through demolition.

First, **the building clearly meets the established criteria for historic significance**, as demonstrated in HPC staff's report, and affirmed by the unanimous support of the HPC and its eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. Architecturally, it is a **standout example of Georgian Revival design** and a rare example of a property with numerous additions which do not diminish the property's integrity. Many of these additions are the work of Eschweiler & Eschweiler, among **the most celebrated Milwaukee architects of the 20th century**. The original 1919 building designed by Schmidt, Garden & Martin is **one of a very limited number of the 300 hospitals designed by this important firm that remain in the country**, and may be the only one from this period. This is also one of few remaining intact examples of the influential "pavilion plan" hospital design in Milwaukee. Columbia Hospital was also **a medical pioneer** in Milwaukee, playing a leading role in medical research throughout its existence. To allow the demolition of such a significant place would greatly diminish the neighborhood's well-known architectural character, which long predates ownership by the university.

Secondly, **the public deserves to have a continued say in the future of such a significant community landmark**. If the building is not designated, there would be no avenue for public input into the long-term use of the site, which to date has only been described very broadly as green space. Notably, designation would not preclude the possibility of demolition; it would simply establish a process where demolition would require public input. **If the building is historic, which has been shown to be the case, designation should proceed**. Once designated, if the owner wishes to demolish the building, they could still do so with approval of the HPC, or even over the HPC's objection on appeal to this body. Each of these steps allows for public input, and the delay would provide time for a win-win solution to be reached. Supporting the present question of designation now allows time to thoughtfully address the possible future question of demolition.

Additionally, **the building can absolutely be restored and returned to viable use to benefit the owner and community.** The many historic warehouses and other large commercial buildings throughout the city that are restored every year are evidence. Many of these projects take advantage of **Historic Tax Credits**, which the owner could partner with others to use to return up to 40% of their rehabilitation expenses. Consider the example of the Milwaukee Soldiers Home's Old Main, built in 1869 and left vacant in 1989. By 2010, part of the roof had collapsed, and many said it could not be saved. Thoughtful partnerships, creative funding, and a commitment to preservation, however, resulted in the restoration of this historic building as housing for homeless veterans after more than 30 years of vacancy last year in a project that has been lauded nationwide for its impact. Old Main is older, was empty longer, and was in much worse condition than Columbia Hospital, yet it was restored to great acclaim. A 2014 study by Quorum Architects indicated that the same is possible here. Even disregarding student housing or classrooms, **the owner could partner with others** to create senior, faculty, graduate student, or affordable housing, offices, or more in the building. Many of these uses would **allow access to additional funding tools** as well. Designation today would allow the time for these win-win solutions to be explored and stay in line with the plan the owner presented when the building was purchased 12 years ago.

Importantly, **demolition of this 220,000 sq.ft. building would be an environmental disaster, adding almost 11,000 tons of usable building material to our local landfills**, negating the hard work that residents, the university, and the City are expending to limit our collective environmental impact, and running counter to sustainability goals. Along with the impact to open land, resident health, and taxpayer dollars of continuing to fill our landfills, it is important to consider that 72% of a building's carbon impact is expended in manufacturing, transporting, and constructing building materials. Restoration maintains this embodied energy instead of expending even more on demolition or new construction. **Rehabilitation rather than demolition would have the same impact on waste generation as if 49,000 people (8% of the City's population) never used a plastic bag for their entire life.** For another comparison, **reusing Columbia Hospital rather than demolishing and building new would have the same impact as 22,534 Milwaukeeans not driving for an entire year!** Stated differently, **if this building were demolished, it would effectively erase the environmental benefit of recycling 34,304,800 aluminum cans.** In our efforts to limit and adapt to climate change, we all have a responsibility to make environmentally sustainable choices. Preservation is that choice, and designation is the path.

Finally, **demolition would squander public funds.** The owner purchased this building and others in 2010 for \$20.2 million and has spent millions more in maintenance in the ensuing 12 years. **The responsible use of public funds is to maintain this investment through adaptive reuse** rather than spending an additional \$6 million on demolition. **If the building is demolished, the result will have been tens of millions of public dollars spent over more than a decade to gain an empty lot.** Landfilling a historic asset that has already received considerable public investment and replacing it with an empty lot would be a shortsighted and wasteful use of public funds. The community deserves better and certainly deserves the input opportunity that designation would allow.

For these reasons, we strongly believe that Columbia Hospital deserves permanent historic designation and urge the Committee to grant the designation.

Thank you as always for your hard work on behalf of the people and places of Milwaukee.

Respectfully,

Jeremy Ebersole
Executive Director
Milwaukee Preservation Alliance

Milwaukee Preservation Alliance is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization devoted to promoting stewardship and awareness of the historic, cultural, and economic value of Milwaukee's built heritage.
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