

CITY OF SAINT PAUL HERITAGE PRESERVATION COMMISSION STAFF REPORT

FILE NAME: 2260 Summit Avenue (University of St. Thomas-Loras Hall)
INVENTORY NUMBER: RA-SPC-3790
APPLICANT: Mark Vangsgard, University of St. Thomas
DATE OF PER APPLICATION: November 30, 2020
HPC SITE/DISTRICT: Summit Avenue West Preservation District
DISTRICT PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE: 1885-1938
SITE CATEGORY: Contributing **SAINT PAUL WARD:** 4 **DISTRICT COUNCIL:** 14
ZONING: R2 **PROPOSAL:** Demolition
STAFF: George Gause

A. SITE DESCRIPTION:

The Saint Paul Seminary opened on the current south campus of St. Thomas in 1893–1894. Funded by James J. Hill, the seminary originally consisted of a campus of six buildings, including Loras Hall, all of which were designed by Cass Gilbert. After designing the Saint Paul Seminary campus, Gilbert was awarded the commission to design the Minnesota State Capitol building, which would bring him to national prominence. He would go on to design the Woolworth Building in New York City and the U.S. Supreme Court Building in Washington, D.C.

St. Thomas acquired Loras Hall in 1982 from the Seminary. After acquisition, it was used for a student dormitory in the same fashion as original design for the young men of the seminary. Today, it is used for a mix of University functions, including faculty offices, music practice rooms, a credit union, and storage.

The building is five floors plus a basement. Floors two through five today resemble the student dorm room scaled spaces that are suitable for officing and small meeting space. The building is approximately 35,500 sf, including basement level. The building dimensions are 152' long x 39' wide. Interior room width across the narrow direction of the building is a mere 13' each side of the 6' clear corridor. Floor-to-floor heights vary from 12' on first floor to a short 10' on upper floors and 9' or less on 5th floor in the attic. Ceilings are at 8' or less on floors above first.

B. BACKGROUND

A 2016 report by Hess Roise and Company evaluated the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) eligibility of the Saint Paul Seminary campus and concluded that, although the seminary campus was historically significant, it lacked enough integrity to convey that significance.

In 2015 the University conducted a facility condition assessment. The building is comprised of a stone foundation and multi-wythe masonry load-bearing exterior and interior corridor walls (varies from 8"-12"). Corrosion has been reported in the exterior wall brick ties. The building has no exterior wall insulation. The floor framing is 2x Douglas Fir. Structural analysis has determined that removal of the interior load-bearing walls to create larger spaces would require enlarging the building footings.

C. HPC PRE-APPLICATION

The commission reviewed the pre-application for the demolition October 5, 2020. The commission comments from that meeting:

- I'm greatly concerned about the demolition.*
- Mothballing or rotating the structure should be reexamined.*
- Preserving cultural heritage should be a mission of a University.*
- The profound importance of a Cass Gilbert designed building should outweigh demolition.*
- Demolition seems to be a short-term solution.*
- Has an environmental impact study been accomplished?*
- The University should be working on creatively integrating Loras Hall into the STEM building, it's an opportunity to showcase how the past and future can exist as one.*

D. PROPOSED CHANGES:

The preferred option is for the demolition of Loras Hall to build a new 120,000-gross-square-foot combined Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math (STEAM) building on the south campus area of the St. Paul campus. The design period of the project (estimated January 2021 to January 2022). The new infill construction would be located within the Summit West Heritage District and would require HPC review and action.

E. GUIDELINE CITATIONS:

The Secretary of the Interior’s Standards for Rehabilitation:

Guideline	Meets Guideline?	Staff Comments
<p>2. The historic character of a property shall be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features and spaces that characterize a property shall be avoided.</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>Demolition will remove the contributing structure.</p>
<p>5. Distinctive features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property shall be preserved.</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>Demolition will remove the contributing structure.</p>
<p>6. Deteriorated historic features shall be repaired rather than replaced. Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature shall match the old in design, color, texture, and other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features shall be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.</p>	<p>No</p>	<p>The documentation suggests that the building is deteriorated, and restoration is not an option to consider.</p>

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Sec. 74.39 Demolition (Summit Avenue West Heritage District)

Guideline	Meets Guideline?	Comments
<p><i>When reviewing proposals for demolition of structures within the district, the heritage preservation commission refers to Section 73.07(9)(b) of the Saint Paul Legislative Code:</i></p> <p><i>"In the case of the proposed demolition of a building, prior to approval of said demolition the commission shall make written findings on the following: architectural and historical merit of the building, the effect of the demolition on surrounding buildings, the effect of any proposed new construction on the remainder of the building (in case of partial demolition) and on surrounding buildings, and the economic value or usefulness of the building as it now exists or if altered or modified in comparison with the value or usefulness of any proposed structures designated to replace the present building or buildings."</i></p>	<p>N/A</p>	<p>Although in 2016 the Seminary campus was found to have lost integrity, this is still one of the original six structures.</p> <p>See 'F. Staff Comments' for findings.</p>

F. STAFF COMMENTS:

For demolition applications, review is focused by *Legislative Code 73.07(9)(b)* by a series of questions (three apply to this application):

Architectural and historical merit of the building

Loras Hall is an original structure to the Saint Paul Seminary (now University of St. Thomas), designed by Cass Gilbert, who is a noted architect. The 2017 assessment speculates that Loras Hall is eligible to the National Register individually.

Under Criterion C, there might be a case for National Register eligibility for the three buildings that survive from the 1890s. (Loras Hall is one of these) The seminary was an early and important commission for Gilbert, so the buildings could represent a significant milestone in the development of his career.¹

The effect of the demolition on surrounding buildings

Demolition would result in the loss of another early Cass Gilbert structure on the campus. Although there has been changes to the campus over time, these early structures serve as a reminder of the past. Alterations have eroded the integrity of the south campus over the years.

For the campus west of Cretin, Loras Hall, St. Mary's Chapel, and some landscape features are contributing, but the rest of the historic district is occupied by noncontributing new construction and parking lots.²

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¹ *The University of St. Thomas, The St. Paul Seminary and Historic Summit Avenue: An Assessment of Cultural Resources* by Hess Roise and Company 2017, page 36

² *Ibid*, page 2

The economic value or usefulness of the building... as it now exists in comparison with the value or usefulness of any proposed structures designated to replace the present building or buildings

The University has performed an internal options audit of the usefulness of the building. It is not clear who was involved in the options that were studied, what rank voting criteria was used or how a \$10 million-dollar renovation number was determined. The building is currently being used.

In connection with its commitment to academic excellence and desire to create a world class academic community, the University seeks to build a new 120,000-gross-square-foot science, engineering and arts building on the south campus area of the St. Paul campus. This STEAM building (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) is critical to the University's mission as it prepares to serve the student growth and employer demand in these fields and majors.

Currently, the building provides little to no direct benefit to students. Built in 1894, the building has an outdated heating system, little ventilation and no insulation, making it extremely inefficient by today's sustainability standards.

Preliminary estimates indicate that it would cost nearly \$10 million to rehabilitate and repurpose Loras Hall. Unfortunately, even with this significant financial investment, the building's construction and configuration limit the way in which it can be used and this, in turn, limits the ability of the University to create a STEAM complex to meet the needs of today's students and the STEAM programs.

Given the limitations on the current use of the building, and the limitations which would exist following the nearly \$10 million rehabilitation, the building has little to no economic value or usefulness.³

Staff received two technical documents with the submittal; a 2015 Building Envelope Assessment performed by INSPEC and a relocation opinion from Palanisami & Associates. Conclusions were that the building needed major renovation (\$1,075,000) and that the “*economic value is overvehemently in favor of new construction*”. Neither firm appears to have any background in working on historic structures or preservation according to their company websites.

The application also discussed five options that were explored. An evaluation system was used with criteria such a ‘value’, ‘enriching outcomes’, ‘investment’ and ‘sustainability’. These criteria are poorly defined, subjective and contain no examples. The scoring seems arbitrarily focused on demolition and new construction. It is unclear who was scoring the options.

Although this is a substantial application package, it is deficient of substance. The assessment of the merit, effect and value of Loras Hall all comes from the perspective of a desire to construct a new building instead of objectively reviewing the existing structure. An independent, robust exploration of options is needed with independent reviewers from the community. The question of why the new STEAM building has to be where Loras Hall is located has not been fully explained. The university has open space and parking lots that could be developed which would avoid demolition costs and sustainability issues such as disposal of the demolition waste.

G. SUGGESTED MOTION:

I move to deny the application for demolition of Loras Hall at the University of Saint Thomas as per the findings of fact and condition in the draft resolution, presented testimony, submitted documentation and information provided in the staff report.

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³ Vangsgard, Mark. “City of St. Paul Demo Permit Application letter.” Received by George Gause, November 6, 2020.



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