



*Working to protect the Mississippi River
and its watershed in the Twin Cities area.*

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July 15th, 2013

President Kathy Lantry
St. Paul City Council
320-C City Hall
15 Kellogg Blvd W
Saint Paul, MN 55102

President Lantry and Councilmembers,

Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is a local non-profit community-based organization that works to protect and enhance the natural and cultural assets of the Mississippi River and its watershed in the Twin Cities. We have 1,700 active members, and 3,000 active volunteers who care deeply about the river's unique public values.

We are writing today in opposition to the proposed local historic designation of Island Station. In addition to this letter, we have shared our reasons for opposition in our email newsletter, sent today to more than ten thousand subscribers, and published online at <http://tinyurl.com/islandstation>.

We believe there are two distinct sets of objectives community members hold for Island Station. One is preservation of the structure, which is not eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, but could perhaps be described as marginally historic. The other is to create a major regional hub for river recreation and environmental education, and potential new headquarters for the National Park Service, as envisioned in the Great River Passage Master Plan. After much consideration, we have come to the conclusion that these two sets of objectives stand in conflict with one another.

Last week, you heard that St. Paul emergency responders and inspectors look at the building as a major safety hazard. You saw pictures of a crumbling structure. You heard from the owner of the building, who has spent years shopping the building around to over 50 parties, and consulting experts in the field of preservation. You heard that reuse of the building is a long, long way from economically feasible in the marketplace. This is a building on its last legs, a safety hazard, without access to the kinds of major resources needed to stabilize and rehabilitate it.

At the same time, the land at Island Station creates an ideal hub for small-scale recreational boaters, with an easy, shallow grade into the water. The separation between what's left of the erstwhile island and shore creates the ideal space for a new, small-scale marina. In recent years, the National Park Service has taken thousands of urban youth out on the river each year for a one-of-a-kind experience, and this would be an ideal launch site for these and other river-oriented activities led by the Park Service and its partners. While many communities would love the National Park Service to locate in their city, the Island Station site is one of the few that seem a real possibility to move their headquarters, which would open many doors for St. Paul.

Following this logic, St. Paul's Great River Passage Plan, adopted earlier this year, centers partly around the idea of creating a key outdoor activity hub at Island Station. Ice skating, zip lines, rock climbing, bike rental, a café, canoeing and kayaking are all contemplated in City plans for the site.

Concepts for the area aspired to include the existing historic structure in a re-imagined public space; however, many would acknowledge that most of these kinds of uses could just as easily – and perhaps more easily - exist without the building and its massive cost for rehab.

Year after year, the building deteriorates further, and has become the central obstacle standing in the way of developing the kind of central hub envisioned in the Great River Passage Master Plan. Partners like the National Park Service stand in waiting to help realize goals of the Great River Passage plan at the site, but their patience is not eternal, and the potential of the site may be passed by.

Assume the structure is designated: then what? Absent from public discussion has been any assessment of the specific path forward or mention of the tools or financing that are available to rehabilitate this structure. That key question lacks compelling answers, and to designate the structure without those answers is not responsible. If the structure sits derelict and deteriorating for years, there may be lost opportunities that pass by to leverage outside investment, partner with organizations like the National Park Service and create a dynamic access hub on St. Paul's riverfront that attracts people from across the region. That would be a huge loss and a setback to the newly adopted Great River Passage Master Plan.

Some may hope, against the odds, for something like T.J. Hammerstrom's condominium proposal of ten years ago. That project failed at the height of the condo boom, because the fundamental economics of the project were a long way from working. That proposal had neighborhood support, yet would have privatized much of the site. In the context of the new Great River Passage Plan, FMR would strongly oppose such a proposal. If a developer does pursue such a concept, the City has limited tools to ensure the site becomes a public hub. We believe both represent very real possibilities for lost potential.

For these reasons, after much thought, we are compelled to advise against placing what seems a long-shot bet on an undefined path to save a modestly historic power plant, a bet which is meanwhile likely to forestall other opportunities.

Those other opportunities, with their surer path forward, seem most compelling and most advisable to us. It is the potential to attract the National Park Service to move dozens of staff from their offices from a downtown high-rise to a more public and active Park headquarters on the banks of St. Paul's riverfront that compels us. It is the opportunity to create a dynamic statewide center for outdoor recreation and environmental education in our own National Park that inspires us.

We therefore urge you not to support historic designation for Island Station.

Please call me or River Planner Bob Spaulding at 651-222-2193 with questions.

Sincerely,



Whitney L. Clark
Executive Director

cc: Councilmembers
Mayor's Office (Mayor Chris Coleman, Nancy Homans & Anne Hunt)
Department of Parks & Recreation (Director Mike Hahm, Don Ganje & Jody Martinez)
Department of Planning & Economic Development (Director Cecile Bedor & Amy Spong)