

February 18, 2020

Dear Honorable Mayor and City Council,

The members of the Historic Commission have asked me to represent them in addressing the City Council's discussion regarding City Hall as part of the capital needs and bond proposal agenda item.

At our last meeting, the Historic Commission discussed the various considerations and proposals that have been presented to the Council. After lengthy deliberation about our responsibility as an advisory body to the City Council, we decided to express our concerns regarding City Hall.

We recognize the sense of urgency the City faces in its decision about City Hall. It is clearly imperative that the City provides a safe structure for its employees to do their work. We also appreciate that the Council has dedicated significant time considering the preservation of City Hall as an alternative.

The Historic Commission has identified three primary concerns that we respectfully bring forward for your consideration.

First, City Hall is identified as a structure of "significant historical value" and we believe that as the process moves forward, preserving City Hall should continue to be considered as an alternative.

The City of Ashland's Municipal Code, in outlining the duties and responsibilities of the Historic Commission, specifies that we are "to promote public support in the preservation of Ashland's historic past." The Plaza is a significant historic location in Ashland. When entering the Plaza, City Hall is the most prominent building given its unique angled corner location. This is why the proposal for a new building, even if it is a 'historically compatible' structure, will diminish the historical value of the Plaza.

The City Hall was built in 1891, as you know, after Abel Helman donated a land grant. There were substantial additions and remodeling that took place over the years, which diminished, to some extent, its original historic character. The stucco material that now covers the original brick facade was presumably intended to achieve a more modern appearance. This was not uncommon in many of our Downtown District buildings, such as Elks Hall (1910) and the Lithia Springs Hotel (1925), which are built with concrete.

In 1989, the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) designated the Downtown Historic District including City Hall and the Plaza to the National Historic Register of Places. Given its historic stature, we are concerned that such a prominent building may be demolished.

Secondly, the Commission supported the Ad Hoc Committee's recommendation in 2017 to repair City Hall and keep it downtown. We believe that the option to seismically retrofit and renovate City Hall is a viable approach to satisfy the City's goals of safety, historic preservation and the environment.

We agree with the City's consultants that a rehabilitated City Hall will be safe, and last another 100 years. One of the less appreciated advantages of preserving historic buildings is that existing buildings are proven to be the "greenest" buildings. This is because maintaining and restoring existing structures reduces waste in the landfill, conserves embedded energy, and protects our environment with less materials than would be needed for a new building.

Finally, the Commission is aware of the many challenges that the Council faces for the City Hall building project including the construction staging space and the impact of the timeline to the public, to tourism, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, and the Plaza merchants.

The Commission's hope is that the Council will continue to consider rehabilitation as an alternative. The Historic Commission supports the suggestion by the City's consultants at the February 4 Council meeting to include professionals who have had experience in such projects. As part of this inquiry, the design/build team could focus more fully and explore the best methods for how these historic unreinforced masonry buildings have been successfully executed in Oregon, specifically for timeline efficiency and construction staging.

Again, we thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Dale Shostrom
Chair of Ashland Historic Commission

