

What's historic designation worth? Fate of 89-year-old building in southern Minnesota in doubt

by Brian Johnson

MINNEAPOLIS, MN -- An 89-year-old school building in the southern Minnesota town of Kasson made the National Register of Historic Places last month, but fans of the prairie-style brick building aren't breaking out the champagne just yet.

In fact, they may never get a chance to.

That's because the fate of the vacant, 30,000-square-foot building is still in doubt. Kasson city officials want to tear down the school and build a library at the site, much to the chagrin of preservationists who hope to find a new use for the now officially historic structure.

The Kasson Alliance for Restoration (KARE), a local historic preservation group, is seeking a permanent injunction against demolition. A district judge will consider the request in mid-February.

"The February trial is only answering one question: is the building a historic resource as defined under Minnesota law," said Kenton Spading, a spokesman for KARE. "The National Register designation pretty much answers that question.

"The February trial is really kind of a slam dunk at this point. A judge is going to have a difficult time ruling against us."

Even if the judge issues a permanent injunction, the building could still be torn down at some point. However, city officials would have to "jump through more hoops" and try to find an alternative to demolition, Spading said.

Meanwhile, Kasson officials say the building's new historic designation doesn't change a thing. "I am sure that [historic designation] will be used in court, but as we found out ... it appears pretty much any public building over 50 years old can be put on the National Register," said Randy Lenth, Kasson's city administrator.

In Lenth's estimation, the fact that the Kasson school building is on the National Register diminishes the value of getting placed on the National Register.

"This type of designation for that building seems to take away some of the prestige" of being on the National Register, Lenth said.

A historical review of the property posted on KARE's Web site states that the school building was a hub of local activity for years and that the school's closing in the mid-1990s was "an emotional blow" to the community.

Designed by local architect Nels Jacobson, the building served for many years as an elementary school. It later housed school district offices,

community education and alternative education classes and other activities until the building was shut down in 2004.

The building has been vacant for most of the past three and a half years, although a local community college used it for law enforcement training courses last summer. The law enforcement training ended in August.

Spading said a number of developers have expressed interest in reusing the school. And now that the school is on the National Register, he added, it's potentially more attractive to developers because the building's renovation would be eligible for historic preservation tax credits.

Most historic school buildings that have been saved or restored are on the National Register, including a Red Wing school that was converted to condominiums, according to Spading.

Still, he said it sounds like the city has made up its mind to demolish the building.

"We are hoping at some point they are going to sit down and talk to us and we will explore other options," he said. "The real key is to explore options for reusing it and getting the citizens behind those options."

Lenth doubts if any feasible development plan will come forward.

The decision to demolish the building wasn't something the city "just dreamed up," he said. In 2006, city voters rejected a \$3.9 million plan to renovate the building with public funds and convert it to city offices and a library.

Today, Lenth said, it would cost an additional \$2 million to do that project. As for private developments, Lenth said the city has been asking KARE for the past year and a half to come up with details on a development plan, financing, and information on who would maintain the building.

"No one is lining up at the door to do this," he said. "Our plan is to demolish it. What is your plan?"