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Subject: Proposal for the 100 Block of State Street

Dear Friends:

I urge you to reject the proposal to demolish buildings on the 100 block of State Street, including the Schubert Building, the Fairchild Building and the Vallender Building.

Have you heard of the Main Street program? It was established in 1980 by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. It is a national program to promote downtown economic development hand-in-hand with historic preservation. Wisconsin has its own Main Street program in partnership with the National Trust. Thirty-six villages and cities currently take part. Nationally, 2000 downtowns have used the program. In Wisconsin, alone, the Main Street program (from 1988-2010) has resulted in 5700 buildings rehabilitated for a total public and private investment of over one billion dollars. The program is so valuable that when the current Governor zeroed out funding for it, the legislature (including Republicans) soon restored it.

Although Madison is too large to qualify for the Main Street program, the benefit of the program for downtowns serves as a lesson to us. Historic preservation is a proven way to promote economic development. Thirty-six villages and cities in Wisconsin have used historic preservation as their means to revitalize their downtowns. The positive benefits are irrefutable. If you don't believe me see <http://www.preservationnation.org/main-street/join/>.

Unlike many other communities, Madison has seen major redevelopment of its downtown since the 1960s. The square has lost a majority of its historic character, but State Street still has a high concentration of historic buildings that contribute to the visual character and the vitality of downtown Madison. The State Street area has been determined eligible for the National Register of Historic Places as an historic district. It is one of Wisconsin's most important tourist destinations.

It would be like shooting ourselves in the foot to permit three historic buildings in the State Street area to be torn down. In a city the size of ours, turning a valuable property into an open plaza is just not good urban design. If any city should know, it should be Madison, which has endured just about every problem an open space can create, two blocks away and in more open sections of the State Street mall. While the Fairchild site is intended to be private, the only way I can see to keep it private, when the restaurant is not open, would be intrusive fences, which would not exactly serve to open up the space. When the library is renovated and the Historical Society gets enlarged, the rental and commercial opportunities for the existing buildings in the 100 block will only be greater. It is simply not good urban or land use design to convert space that can be used for commercial activity into a plaza. We do not need a new open space in this vicinity, we have a great greensward in the capitol grounds.

In my 30 years of work for the City I have visited many buildings in Madison's downtown. You would probably be shocked to see how badly many of the property owners have maintained the upper stories of their buildings. I have seen better maintained buildings than the buildings in the 100 block and I have seen much worse. Many years ago, I was with a property owner when the first floor commercial tenant confronted him about the rainwater streaming through the ceiling and then heard the property owner use his own negligence as a justification for tearing down his building. I have seen poor people living in 19th century conditions, with boarded over windows and a toilet down the hall. I have even seen second stories that have never been finished off or inhabited since the buildings were built. Second stories that are not properly maintained have limited economic value. The photos in the proposal purporting to show deteriorated interiors simply show messy interiors that need sprucing up. Figures that have been offered as estimates for restoration have been grossly inflated.

I want people to know that when a property is landmarked it is not done "just because it's old." It is not done "because some people just love every old building." Rather it takes intensive research and justification, written in the landmark designation form with an explanation of how the building meets the criteria for designation in the City ordinances. It also requires a public hearing, the commendation of the Landmarks Commission and a Common Council vote. It is my opinion that the Fairchild Building and the Vallender Building are eligible to be Landmarks for their architectural significance and the important commercial enterprises that have been located there.

I urge you to protect what is left of the valuable historic character of our downtown on State Street and protect its economic potential for the future.

Kitty Rankin

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