

PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

August 3, 2026

PREPARED FOR THE LANDMARKS COMMISSION



Project Name & Address: 222 E Olin Avenue (Wonder Bar)
Application Type(s): Certificate of Approval for demolition
Legistar File ID # [93871](#)
Prepared By: Heather Bailey, Preservation Planner, Planning Division
Date Prepared: July 29, 2026

Summary

Relevant Ordinance Section:

28.185(7) Review for Historic Value. Every application for demolition or removal of a principal structure shall be reviewed by the Landmarks Commission, which shall provide input to the Building Inspection Division regarding the historic value of the property with the building or structure proposed for demolition or removal.

(a) If the Landmarks Commission determines that the property with the proposed demolition or the structure proposed for removal has no known historic value, the demolition or removal may be approved administratively under sub. (8)(b) below, provided that at least one of the standards for administrative approval have been met.

(b) If the Landmarks Commission determines that the property with the proposed demolition or the structure proposed for removal has historic value, then the Plan Commission shall approve the demolition or removal under sub. (9) below, after considering input from the Landmarks Commission.

(c) Nothing in this subsection eliminates the requirement in MGO Secs. [41.09](#)(1)(c) and [41.12](#)(3) that the demolition of landmark structures or structures in historic districts must also be approved by the Landmarks Commission through the issuance of a Certificate of Approval.

41.28 HISTORIC VALUE ADVISORY RECOMMENDATION

(1) Review for Historic Value. Following a review of MGO Sec. 28.185 applications for demolition by the Landmarks Commission and based upon application materials, and a report by the City's Preservation Planner, and any public testimony, the Commission shall review [MGO Sec. 28.185](#) applications for demolition and assign one of the following Categories to each principal building proposed for demolition:

(a) Category A Demolitions: denotes that the Landmarks Commission finds that the building has historic value based on architectural significance, cultural significance, historic significance, as the work/product of an architect of note, its status as a contributing structure in a National Register Historic District, listed in the National Register of Historic Places, and/or as an intact or rare example of a certain architectural style or method of construction.

(b) Category B Demolitions: denotes that the Landmarks Commission finds that the building has historic value related to the vernacular context of Madison's built environment, cultural practices, or as the work/product of an architect of note, but the building itself is not historically, architecturally or culturally significant.

(c) Category C Demolitions: denotes that the Landmarks Commission finds that the building has no known historic value. This category may also denote sites or properties that have historic value, and the significance will not be negatively impacted by the removal of the building itself. This category may also include sites or properties that have archaeological or other site findings of significance, but where removal of the building itself will have no impact.

(2) Presence of Archaeology. When applicable, each finding shall also note the presence of an archaeological or burial site on the site of the building proposed for demolition.

222 E Olin Avenue

Commercial building constructed circa 1930



Google streetview



Google Earth



Photo from WHS site file, dated 1974

Applicant: Lance McGrath, and Dan Kennelly, Range Hill Partners

Applicant's Comments: The Wonder Bar building has been vacant for more than five years and continues to deteriorate. The building's mechanical equipment, plumbing, and electrical systems are all no longer functional. The building envelope has been compromised, allowing moisture intrusion and observable mold growth. Most of

the windows are broken or boarded up, and its exterior and interior are heavily damaged. The building appears likely to have lead pipes and asbestos on interior materials. It would be extremely difficult to make it compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act given that it is two stories with no elevator, has narrow interior doorways, has non-compliant bathroom layouts, etc.

Staff Findings: The WHS Site File contains minimal information, but does list additional names: Eddie's Wonder Bar, MOB Roadhouse, and Bar Next Door. The City preservation file has a note that "this bar was a favorite watering hole of gangsters on their way from Chicago to the north woods." In 2021, the Landmarks Commission reviewed the historic value of the property with the information that it had at the time. The commission found that this property had historic value related to its Prohibition Era history and as a rare-remaining example of a Prohibition Era roadhouse. Since that time, additional information has come to light, including the Wonder Bar movie of 1934, for which this building was named. That movie prominently featured a black-faced musical number called "Goin to Heaven on a Mule," which many viewed as deeply racist at the time. The romanticization and celebration of white crime and the commemoration of a racist movie as not historic values that align with the heritage the City values.

Staff Recommendation: While there is documentation of the history of this property, it is not a history of value to Madison. As such, staff is recommending a finding of (c) no known historic value.