

Waukesha Common Council denies landmark status for Les Paul Performance Center



Scott Ash

Aldерwoman Kathleen Cummings had hoped the Les Paul Performance Center would be designated a local landmark. But the Common Council voted against it, 10-2, at last week's meeting.

By Christopher Kuhagen

Published on: 2/25/2014

Aldерwoman Kathleen Cummings has been vocal over the last couple of months about history being lost in the city.

"So much of our history has been lost to a bulldozer," she recently said.

Cummings has been adamant about saving the county's former Health and Human Services building, which is now vacant on the county's courthouse campus.

Cummings has also been attempting to get the Les Paul Performance Center named a local landmark. The center was formerly known as the Cutler Park Band Shell.

The band shell isn't being threatened by a bulldozer, but Cummings and the Landmarks Commission wanted to have it get designated as a local landmark.

The Common Council, however, voted Feb. 20 against the Landmarks Commission's recommendation, 10-2. Alderman Daniel Manion joined Cummings in voting in favor of landmark status.

The structure was built in the summer of 1920; it was moved 75 feet west and placed on a new foundation to accommodate a library expansion in 1963. The center is just north of the Waukesha Public Library. It was renamed the Les Paul Performance Center in 1988.

"The building has been modified so many times that there's nothing to preserve from a historical perspective," said Alderman Vance Skinner, who served on the Landmarks Commission for six years.

Cummings explained the council's position: "There is a concern ... that if something is made a landmark it becomes more cumbersome," she said. "What happened is people are scared if something is landmarked there's going to be this struggle."

Cummings told the council that the band shell fits two of the four criteria in the landmark ordinance: it "exemplifies or reflects the broad cultural, political, natural, economic or social history of Waukesha" and "is identified with historic personages or with important events in national, state or local history."

The band shell has been home to the Waukesha Civic Band Summer Concert series for the last 70 years and is named in honor of Waukesha native and music icon Les Paul.

The City of Waukesha owns the structure, and Cummings said the Parks, Recreation and Forestry Board has indicated it would prefer it not be named a landmark.

"There is a concern from the council that if something is made a landmark it becomes more cumbersome," said Cummings, who added that the council did not turn down any of the Landmarks Commission's recommendations in 2013. "What happened is people are scared if something is landmarked there's going to be this struggle. And it doesn't have to be this way. The council needs to look at landmarks as a partner."

But Alderman Steve Johnson said the Landmarks Commission knew that staff and the Park and Rec Board opposed the designation.

"Talk about partnership? That doesn't seem like working together," said Johnson, who added that if it is given landmark status it would limit the Parks, Recreation and Forestry Department from making modifications to the building. "To have it declared a landmark structurally is not even close."