

May 19, 2016

To the Unit 4 Special Facilities Committee:

The openness of this committee to public input continues to be impressive, as is your willingness to respond to public opinion. You already know that I've spoken in the past about the historic importance of the Optioned Properties to the character of the neighborhood west and northwest of West Side Park and north of Central High. I'm here tonight to reiterate my argument that the history of this area is significant to the history of Champaign. I want to argue as well that, as stewards of the school district, you too should be concerned to work with, not against the character of the environments in which schools are placed.

As options for Central's expansion have emerged, it has become apparent that the Optioned Properties are very seriously threatened with demolition, whether for athletic facilities or for parking. In my opinion as an architectural historian, that choice would show a serious misunderstanding of the value of these buildings. Both individually and as a group, they tie together an important aspect of Champaign's past with its present. These buildings cannot be recreated. Once they're gone, they're gone. Throwing them away disregards totally the achievements of important people in our past, as well as the buildings' continuing productive and aesthetic roles in our present. Further, if you take them, they not only cease to provide housing, but they also cease to contribute to the city's tax rolls.

We haven't yet seen whatever updates may be part of tonight's presentation, so we have only previous presentations to go by. But one issue that seems in need of further discussion is that demolishing all of the Optioned Properties, including the very significant Burnham House, may apparently still not provide enough parking to meet the everyday needs of Central High. Still less provided for may be the increased parking demands from the public, if competition-level athletic facilities are built in the vicinity of W. Church and N. Lynn Streets. One of your steady, respected advisers from the audience, architect Neil Strack, has recently put a lot of work into laying out an alternate plan for a parking structure that could be built at W. Church and N. New Streets. Such a plan could avoid demolishing the Burnham House and, I would hope, others of the Optioned Properties. I urge you to look into Neil's suggestion seriously.

I also urge you to study other ways to avoid such intense impacts on this historic neighborhood. The call early on for "creative thinking" in the work of the committee really must be revisited before we lose important resources we cannot replace.

Thank you for considering these thoughts.

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