



REPORT TO HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

FROM: Bruce A. Knight, FAICP, Planning Director

DATE: May 26, 2006

SUBJECT: Case No. PL06-0044: **Application for Landmark Designation for 102 N. Neil Street (Champaign City Building)**

A. Introduction: The Historic Preservation Commission is requested to nominate 102 N. Neil Street (Champaign City Building) as a landmark, and forward the application to the Plan Commission.

B. Recommended Action: Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission nominate 102 N. Neil as a Local Landmark and forward it to the Plan Commission for consideration.

As outlined in §37-497 of the Zoning Ordinance, the applicant asks the Historic Preservation Commission to nominate a property based on specific criteria. If the HPC determines that the property meets the criteria, the Historic Preservation Commission nominates the property to the Plan Commission. Following a public hearing before the Plan Commission the nomination is forwarded to the City Council for action on the Nomination to Designate, based upon an expanded set of criteria.

C. Background:

- 1. Applicant.** Dannel McCollum
- 2. Owner.** The City of Champaign
- 3. Location.** 102 N. Neil Street

4. Description of Property. The Champaign City Building is located at 102 N. Neil Street, at the northeast corner of Neil Street and University Avenue in Downtown Champaign.

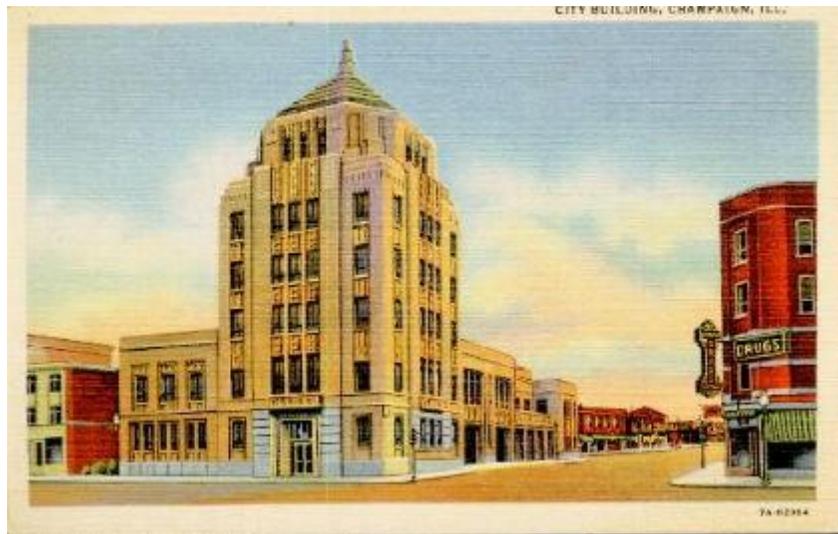
In 1888, the City Council had been renting “Council Rooms” at a fixed location from R.M. Epstein for nearly twenty years, when the Council decided it was time to build a building specifically to operate as the City Building. Council debated six locations, but finally settled on the current lot. The fact that David Bailey offered this site to the City for no cost weighed

heavily in its favor. The City Council then spent the next several months debating the design and architect. Finally they settled on a project and a building was constructed which housed all city operations, including the fire engines, jail, and the library.

This building served until 1935, when the Fire Chief petitioned the Mayor for a new facility to house the fire engine, as the floor in the 1888 building was beginning to sag. The Fire Chief noted that “President Roosevelt has seen fit to grant monies to cities and towns for the purpose of erecting public buildings” and urged the Council to take advantage of this offer. After a public bond issue, the citizens of Champaign opted by a vote of 4 to 1 to fund bonds to build a new City Building and an addition to Burnham City Hospital as well.

Local Architect George Ramey was apparently inspired by the new Los Angeles City Hall in his design of a modern art-deco office tower with the fire department in a wing to the east. The new City Building was ready for occupancy in 1937, when the postcard below was printed.

CITY BUILDING





The City Building's green copper top is a memorable visual element. Originally there were small red lights atop the corners, to alert patrolmen to call the station from police callboxes located around town, before radio use became widespread.



Originally, CFD was carved in the limestone over the pedestrian entrance to the Fire Department. In 1967 when this became the Police Station the "F" was altered to a "P".

When the Police left, this element was not changed.



View looking directly up at the Neil Street entrance, showing art deco design elements.



View from northeast corner



North view of tower section

These views of the building all emphasize its art deco design.

5. Comprehensive Plan and the Downtown Plan. The Comprehensive Plan recognizes historic preservation as a tool for achieving healthy neighborhoods. Strategy 10 of the 2006 Downtown Plan is to Preserve Historic Structures and promote their significance. The Plans encourage the preservation of buildings that have historical and architectural significance as a means of promoting visual environments of high aesthetic quality and variety.

6. Historic Criteria. The applicant proposed the following findings and has requested that the Commission make a determination that the Champaign City Building, at 102 North Neil Street meets the following criteria from Sec. 37-491 of the City Code:

(a) Significant value as part of the historical, cultural, artistic, social, ethnic, or other heritage of the nation, state or community.

By its very nature, the City Building is a significant contributor to the historic and social culture of the City of Champaign. Since it was first occupied in 1937, this building has been the seat of municipal government, and as such the acts of the Council within its walls have had significant effects on the lives of all citizens of Champaign. (The first meeting of the City Council on this location was in 1889, in the first City Building which lasted at this location until 1935, when the

current building was begun.) In 1937 the newly constructed City Building housed the Fire and Police Departments, as well as Administrative Offices.

(c) Representative of the distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type inherently valuable for the study of a period, style, craftsmanship, method of construction, or use of indigenous materials.

The Champaign City Building is considered by many to be the finest example in the region of the Art Deco building style so prevalent in the 1920s and 30s. Many of the examples in the latter decade were buildings financed in part or totally by the Federal Government and the City Building is no exception. The construction of the City Building was funded in good measure by the Federal Public Works Administration.

Tradition has it that the architectural inspiration for the building was the Los Angeles City Hall, with its distinctive tower, which was completed in the late 1920s. It is not clear whether local architect George Ramey was instructed to use the Los Angeles building as a model or if that was his own idea. Ramey, however, was adept at mimicking diverse architectural styles, as indicated by the many houses of his design for the city's elite that reflected varying revival fashions in the teens and twenties.

The exterior of the reinforced concrete building is clad in beige brick with Bedford limestone detailing; the latter enhanced with classic art deco motifs. The square tower portion of the building is topped with a copper clad, pyramidal roof. The roof on the east wing is flat and covered with a synthetic membrane concealed by a parapet.



This photograph of the northeast corner of the building demonstrates many of the elements for which the building is known. This corner was originally the hose-drying tower for the Fire Department, where fire hoses were hung to dry. It incorporates the blond brick and Bedford Limestone, and beautifully showcases the Art Deco style of the building.

Behind the top of this tower is the top of the third story of the sensitive 1986 addition, which recreates the blond brick with limestone details in a manner indistinguishable from the original design.

(e) Identifiable as an established and familiar visual feature in the community owing to its unique location or physical characteristics.

The City Building is located at the intersection of University Avenue and Neil Street, the streets from which all addresses in Champaign are numbered. That the building is iconic is reflected in the fact that it has been incorporated into the City's last two logos, and was in an earlier version of the markings found on all city vehicles.



2004 logo



1985 logo

(f) One of the few remaining examples of a particular architectural style or use, or is an example which clearly represents a major architectural style, and has undergone little or no alteration since its construction.

There are not many clearly art deco public buildings in Champaign and the City Building is an excellent example. Although there have been changes mandated by the significant changes in use when the Fire, then Police Departments moved to their own buildings, they have been undertaken in such a manner as to respect the original character of the building.



The third floor addition to the east wing in 1986 was done to reflect the original style of the building

The Fire Department's truck bays were bricked over in 1967 when the new Fire Station was built

D. Alternatives:

1. Nominate 102 N. Neil Street for landmark status, and forward the case to the Plan Commission.
2. Do not approve the nomination for landmark status, which will deny the nomination.

E. Discussion of Alternatives:

Alternative 1 should be chosen if the Commission determines that the application meets at least one criterion listed in the Zoning Ordinance, Section 37-491, Criteria for Designation of Landmarks. The designation of 102 North Neil Street as a landmark would be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

a. Advantages

- Recognizes the historic character of this community resource.
- Consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and Downtown Plan.
- Promotes the preservation of an important architectural resource.
- Allows the City to lead by example in the area of historic preservation.

b. Disadvantages

- None.

Alternative 2 would not approve the nomination designating 102 North Neil Street as a local landmark. The Historic Preservation Commission should choose this alternative if it determines that the application for 102 North Neil Street meets none of the criteria listed in the Zoning Ordinance for designation as a landmark.

a. Advantages

- None

b. Disadvantages

- Would not be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan and Downtown Plan.
- Does not promote preservation of an important architectural resource.
- Does not allow the City to lead by example in the area of historic preservation.

F. Community Input: A public notice advertising the public hearing for this case before the Historic Preservation Commission on June 1, 2006 appeared in the May 19, 2006 edition of the News Gazette.

G. Budget Impact: There is no significant budget impact for a historic designation.

H. Staffing Impact: In the future Staff may be requested to review an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness, but the processing of such occasional individual applications falls well within the Planning Department's routine baseline services.

Prepared by:

Reviewed by:

Kevin Phillips
Zoning Administrator

Bruce A. Knight, FAICP
Planning Director

Attachments: Application for Landmark Designation
Aerial Photograph
Proposed Findings
"Historical Review of the Champaign City Buildings over the Years" – an article
by former Mayor Dannel McCollum

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Findings of Fact
102 N. Neil Street, the Champaign City Building
Landmark Designation

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Location of 102 N. Neil Street
Overhead photo

