

Missoula's schools have served as centers of community for nearly 150 years. Indeed, it is because historical neighborhood schools are enmeshed in our community, that neighboring residents protest so fervently when school districts announce plans to close, sell, or demolish these communal hubs. While such protests sometimes reflect a feeling of loss for architecturally distinctive buildings, more often and more fundamentally, they are a protest against the destruction of community anchors and neighborhood beacons.

Although many historical schools have suffered from deferred maintenance and other problems, they were generally solidly built, often with great craftsmanship and architectural significance. With the help of creative architects and sensible school board policies, many school districts have demonstrated that historic schools can be brought up to 21st-century standards, and continue to serve the neighborhoods they have anchored for the past 50, 75, or even 100 years. Moreover, when updated to meet contemporary education and building demands, an historical school provides children with the ability to interact with their local history through tangible place. An older school building which has anchored a neighborhood for generations physically represents tradition, continuity, and change-over-time.

While we believe some of the consequences of the Smart Schools Initiative (most notably the demolition of Willard School) are regrettable, we understand that the decisions are final. Now we must look to the future of the remaining stock of historical school properties. If the school board should decide to sell a historic property, then the future use and greater common good ought to be considered. We respectfully request that a historic preservation professional be invited to participate in future planning involving the sale, demolition or alteration of MCPS's remaining historical school properties. Furthermore, we respectfully request improved public participation process and transparency through the establishment of policy which ranks the greatest future public use of any historical property slated for disposal. The "Missoula County Public Schools Building Historicity/Architectural Sensitivity" Report, 11/6/1995, produced by OZ Architects, is a great example of previous efforts to plan for change to education-related infrastructure. The Missoula Historic Preservation Commission would be an excellent source of expertise and would be happy to provide a volunteer for any such committee.

The greater purpose of historic preservation is to encourage the general public to integrate the past with the present and the future. Preservation does not halt growth, change, or progress, but instead emphasizes the totality of human experience in a given community. It drives identity within a city, and it fosters community cohesiveness, cultural identity and interaction. The additional benefits of preservation are varied and many; studies have shown that retaining and using our existing historical buildings boosts local economic development, heritage tourism, small-business growth and sustainability. Recycling historic fabric is inherently environmentally friendly, and the choice alternative when considering environmental impact.

Ideally, school facilities should be planned with input from a representative group of people who use, value, and interact with them, those invested in both Missoula's education and the preservation of our communal identity as seen through the historic built environment.

Respectfully,

Missoula Historic Preservation Commission

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Other Interested Parties

Janene Caywood, Cultural Resource Specialist, Brian Upton, Attorney, Philip Maechling, retired Historic Preservation Officer