

Comments on Case No. HP-2026-L-01, the nomination of the Urbana Civic Center as a local landmark in the City of Urbana, Illinois

Comments to be read aloud at the Historic Preservation Commission meeting scheduled for Wednesday June 3, 2026

Comments provided by commissioner Kathryn Holliday

I am sorry to be absent from this important meeting on June 3, 2026 and to miss the vote regarding the nomination of the Urbana Civic Center as a local landmark. For the record let me begin these comments by stating my strong support for the nomination, which is clearly argued, and makes a strong case for the integrity and significance of the Civic Center as a centerpiece of this community, for its design, its social meaning to multiple generations of people, and its prominent, distinct visual identity the city grid under criteria a, c, d, e, and f as noted in both the staff report and the nomination. Thank you to the community members who researched and wrote this excellent nomination.

I am a professor of historic preservation with more than 15 years of experience in regulation and policy related to historic preservation. I'd like to add just a few short thoughts to my support of this nomination.

First, the building hit the fifty year mark in 2020, two years after it was suddenly closed in 2018 in the midst of a budget crisis. The fifty-year mark is significant for many reasons – a building typically must be 50 years old to be eligible for recognition as landmark. Also when buildings turn 50 they typically need maintenance of all kinds – new roofs, appliances, plumbing and electrical repair, code updates, etc. These are all completely normal needs for buildings as they are used across time. There is nothing deficient about the design of this Civic Center that has caused its need for a new roof – all buildings need new roofs, bathroom updates, and kitchen updates. The city's decision to postpone those repairs and maintenance is the issue, not the building's condition. The building's condition is in fact excellent for a now 56 year old building that has had routine maintenance neglected. I have seen buildings in far, far worse condition come back to life through a thoughtful and reasonable restoration.

Second, the consultant's report commissioned by the MTD during the NEPA / Section 106 process was drastically incorrect in its assessment of the building. The consultant failed to identify the architect, erroneously identified the building as postmodern, and made numerous other errors of fact and interpretation about the building that could easily have been discovered with only modest effort. I mention this not to assign blame but to be clear that this consultant's report did not, and does not, provide a reasonable basis for decision making about the building. The State Historic Preservation Officer's

determination that the Civic Center is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places is a key finding and provides opportunities to explore tax credits and other state incentives for reuse and preservation. If the commission had been aware of this determination, it would have pursued this nomination more than a year ago.

Third, this building represents a truly important part of the history of Urbana and the history of architecture in Illinois. The city grew rapidly in the 1950s and 1960s and the Civic Center project represents a civic belief in the importance of providing public meeting and gathering space for the community. The list of civic organizations, individuals, and events listed in the nomination is truly a record of Urbana's extraordinary civic culture. A photograph inside Civic Center office shows the actor and Urbana native Ed Asner speaking to a gathering of the Champaign County Health Care Consumers. There is nothing else like it in Urbana or Champaign. The farmer's market occupies the Lincoln Square Mall parking lot, but with the closing of the civic center, there is no other public space for people to gather indoors. The Aquatic Center, park pavilions, and the public library do much work to serve the public but they do not offer the same ability to gather. The library, aquatic center, and park structures also do not turn a profit or pay for themselves – they are provided by the city as needed public good. The expectation that a civic center would turn a profit is not in keeping with other civic institutions in Urbana.

The architects who took on the charge for the Civic Center created a generous public space for gathering, using the four pyramidal cupolas to bring natural light into indoor rooms, using Douglas fir, cedar, and brick to provide warmth to a space wrapped with steel and glass windows. Smith Seaton and Olach's work shows the influence of their teachers at the University of Illinois, especially A. Richard Williams, FAIA – the track lighting provides directional light mixed with the diffused natural light, the cement cylinders filled with stones provide drainage basins for water from the roof. These elements combine modern materials and design with ancient techniques. Perhaps we cannot see the building's generosity and innovation clearly today because it is being used as a surplus furniture warehouse and we are blinded by its need for maintenance and reinvestment.

Fourth, the Civic Center is ripe for reuse, either as an integral part of a transit center or fulfilling other aspects of the Imagine Urbana city plan. Imagine Urbana emphasizes sustainability – new construction is the biggest contributor to greenhouse gas emissions in the world. Adaptive reuse of a landmarked building is the most socially and environmentally conscious strategy. Imagine Urbana also emphasizes the unique nature of our community and retaining the assets that emphasize it. The Civic Center has enormous potential as a transit center, a community center, a preschool, or a maker space. Citizens have testified before council in just the past few months about the need

for places for community members to gather and pursue activities together. The Civic Center site is at an important junction between Main Street and the Boneyard Creek trail – pushing the bus toward Vine Street, to keep buses on major arterial roads instead of blocking pedestrian passage with idling buses would have huge benefit. There are many ways of thinking about the transit center project that have not come to the table because of a predetermination about how this site should be used.

Finally, I would suggest this moment provides a great opportunity to think about what expertise is needed to assess city assets, from culture to real estate. The MTA's hired consultant that assessed the Civic Center site did a poor job in this case. Architects and historians who deal specifically with existing buildings and have experience working within existing building envelopes with the goal of reuse should be at the table when the city is making decisions regarding development. Practitioners with experience in the reuse and reinvention of buildings are best able to assess future possibilities. As the newest member of the Historic Preservation Commission, I hope that the HPC will be consulted in many more planning projects. This is not because I believe the HPC should have final say. It is because the HPC's input is an important foundation for informed decisions by council and our Mayor.