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LF Council affirms HPC decision on Hurrle Hall

By ZACH HACKER
Staff Writer

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Both sides made their cases, Monday, as the Little Falls City Council heard an appeal to the Heritage Preservation Commission's (HPC) decision to approve a permit for the demolition of Hurrle Hall.

After nearly two hours, the Council voted unanimously to affirm the HPC's approval to issue the permit to the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls. Their plan is to deconstruct the building, which was built in 1891 and has been home to a convent, a hospital, an orphanage and much more over the last 130 years.

The plan to "deconstruct" aims to reuse and repurpose as many of the materials from the building as possible, such as stained glass windows, bricks and woodwork. The appeal was made by the Friends of Hurrle Hall, a local nonprofit organization which aims to preserve the building.

In 2016, the group stopped the Sisters' initial effort to deconstruct the building by filing a civil lawsuit. The Sisters agreed to not take further action until at least 2019, and to con-



Staff photo by Zach Hacker

Lois Maciej read a prepared statement on behalf of the Friends of Hurrle Hall, Monday, during a public hearing at Little Falls City Hall.

sider selling the building if the Friends of Hurrle Hall and the Preservation Alliance of Minnesota — now renamed Rethos — could bring a serious developer forward.

It was estimated by firms hired by the Sisters that renovating the building for the purpose of turning it into any kind of housing unit would cost \$12.25 million. Deconstruction is estimated to cost between \$1 million and \$1.1 million.

Prior to testimony from both the Friends of Hurrle Hall and the Sisters, City Attorney Alissa Harrington explained

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LF ballot question for rec center could be delayed

By ZACH HACKER
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The fact a special session of the Minnesota Legislature seems unlikely may spell bad news for one of Little Falls' top projects in 2022.

On June 17, Gov. Tim Walz met with DFL House Speaker Melissa Hortman and Republican Senate Majority Leader Jeremy Miller, after which he said talks of a special session were at an "impasse." That leaves an amendment to the amount Little Falls could ask for in local option sales tax funding on a 2022 ballot question to fund a proposed community recreation center in limbo.

Walz has pushed for a special session since the Legislature recessed from its 2022 session, May 23. That is largely due to the fact \$7.2 billion of the state's record \$9.25 billion surplus remains unspent, with several options on the table for where that money could go. However, legislative leaders

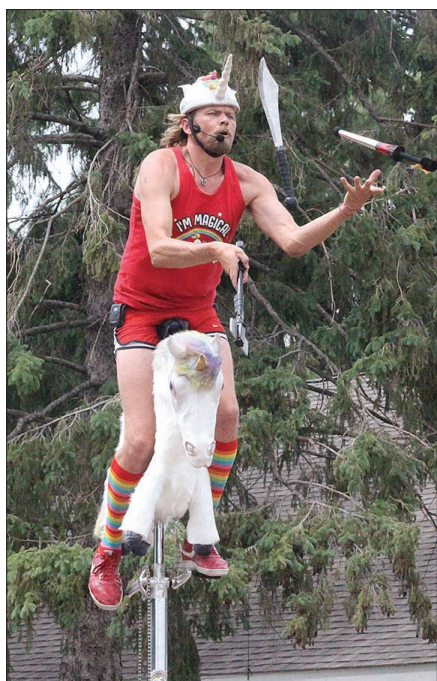
have said the two parties are too far apart on spending priorities.

The city did receive approval on a request to ask for \$17 million in local option sales tax funding via a half-cent sales tax over 30 years on the November 2022 ballot. However, it wants to amend that amount to \$33 million over 30 years — due in large part to inflation — to pay for an estimated 95,000 square foot facility.

City Administrator Jon Radermacher said Mayor Greg Zylka has "worked very hard" with Rep. Ron Kresha, R-Little Falls, and Sen. Paul Gazelka, R-Nisswa, to get the amendment to where it is.

"I'm crossing my fingers and hoping," Radermacher said. "I've had my folks that I know on the back channels of that — the lobbying side — that it's in there and what has been presented isn't the final decision. There's been discussions about where these projects that are asking for amendments on the dollar amount, where they're going to end up."

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Staff photos by Zach Hacker

Dam Festival 2022 ushers in summer fun

One day was not enough to contain the live music, food, beverage and entertainment options, as the Dam Festival festivities in Maple Island Park in Little Falls fired up Friday and lasted until well into the night, Saturday, June 18. Clockwise from top left: Jamey Mossengren, AKA The Uncycling Unicorn, juggles a torch, a sword and a selfie stick — complete with his own iPhone — atop a 12-foot-tall unicycle, Saturday; Jaxon Harris, 6, Little Falls, is all smiles as he tries his hand at bungee jumping; River, a 9-week-old puppy, makes a new friend at the Dam Festival with the help of his owner, Lisa Jensen of Eagan; Nic Schweisthal, an 11-year veteran of the Little Falls Fire Department, drops into the dunk tank; Winston, 8, and Monty Dobson, 5, of Monticello, cool down with some shaved ice from Patrick's Cotton Candy Express; and Michael Barnabo-Rose, 3, Little Falls, picks up some speed as he goes down an inflatable slide.



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Randall Fire department open house
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Bouncy houses for the kids
Cash raffle drawing @ 4:00 pm
Street Dance with music by Marshall
Star starting around 8:00 pm

FOOD

Little Elk Lions brat & hot dog sale 12:00 - 4:00 pm
Randall Cushing area Lions club beverage sale
starting @ 12:00 pm
Dairy Princesses will be serving ice cream
Additional concessions on sight

Medallion hunt sponsored by the Lions Club starts Monday, June 27th • \$300 prize!

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LF Council affirms HPC decision

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the process and what the results of the appeal hearing could be. She said, though the Council is normally a legislative body, its discretion was somewhat limited in the proceeding because it would be acting in a “quasi-judicial” capacity.

“The Council is acting in a judge-like manner and must base its decision only on the testimony and evidence received during the hearing and on the record as it applies to the individual land use application at issue,” Harrington said.

In terms of background, Harrington said the Sisters applied for a demolition permit from the city. Their application was found to be complete, but because the building was designated as a local historic landmark in 2002, it was passed on to the HPC.

The HPC had a choice to delay the permit for 90 days, or to approve it. On June 6, it approved the application. Monday, the City Council had the option to either affirm the decision, overrule the decision or to delay a decision to request more information from city staff.

If the Council had chosen to overturn the HPC’s ruling, city code states that if no further action was taken by the Friends of Hurrle Hall within 60 days, the city building official could issue the permit.

The testimony began with Lois Maciej representing the Friends of Hurrle Hall. She told the Council there were two parties interested in purchasing the building — Collin Francis, who spoke during public comment at the outset of the appeal hearing, and Metro-Plains Development Partners. She also questioned how many more people might have been interested if it had been advertised as being for sale by the Sisters.

She argued preserving the building would benefit both the Sisters and the city. The Sisters, she said, would not have to pay the cost to deconstruct the building, and the city could possibly gain more housing.

She read, from the city’s website, that the HPC’s primary purpose is “to work on the preservation and protection” of buildings and land with significant historic, cultural and ethnic interests.

“This is saying, ‘Protect and preserve Hurrle Hall,’” Maciej said. “It doesn’t say to tear it down or to give the permit for doing it, so please deny the demolition permit for Hurrle Hall to keep it protected.”

She said the city and the Sisters would be “throwing money away” by demolishing Hurrle Hall.

Erin Hanafin Berg, policy director and deputy directory at Rethos, expressed concerns about how the HPC reviewed the demolition application.

She alleged the document submitted to the HPC that summarized the last 20 years concerning the future of Hurrle Hall left out the information about the building being listed as a historic landmark. Due to the wording of the ordinance in city code regarding the HPC, she believed the application should have been denied because it is eligible to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

She also cited standards set forth by the Secretary of the Interior, which is included in city code as a determining factor when dealing with historic buildings. Berg said,

based on two standards, she felt the permit should have been denied. Those were that “every reasonable effort shall be made to provide a compatible use for a property...” and the “distinguishing original qualities or character ... shall not be destroyed.”

“We are confident that alternatives to demolition do exist for Hurrle Hall,” Berg said. “As has already been stated at the HPC and before this meeting, there is a need for housing in the community, and Hurrle Hall would likely be a good candidate for reuse.”

She said successful examples of historic building similar to Hurrle Hall turned into apartment buildings could be found in New Ulm, Cloquet and Winona, with others underway in International Falls, Duluth and Eagle Bend.

“These deals do take time to pull together, and they take a willingness to partner with funders, community development entities and the broader community at a level that the Sisters have seemed unwilling to consider,” she said.

She said, in 2015, she met with the Sisters

and shared public funds that were available that could help them pay for renovation and repairs. Along with that, she said she presented tax credits that were there for potential developers. Those suggestions and offers to help, Berg said “appeared to fall on deaf ears.”

She said the Sisters never listed the building for sale, never stated a purchase price or articulated the kind of reuse plans they would consider. They also, she alleged, never reached out to the city or the HPC for help.

“I have seen historic buildings in far worse condition than this one that have been successfully rehabilitated and have become economic and cultural anchors for their communities,” Berg said. “Many cities’ very existence and main economic engines are due to the fact that they chose preservation over demolition again and again.”

Connie Lies, a former HPC and city council member in Litchfield, also spoke on behalf of the Friends of Hurrle Hall. She said she earned her election to the city council because of her work on a historic building that was set to be demolished. After seven years and the previous council voting for demolition seven times, she said a buyer came forward and revitalized the building.

She said the estimated cost to do so was \$6 million, and they were able to do it for \$1.2 million.

Lies said who owns the property should have no bearing on whether or not a permit to demolish should be approved. It only matters that the Council follows the law, which she believed stipulated Hurrle Hall should be preserved.

She said she questioned the Sisters’ estimate that it would cost \$12.25 million to renovate the building into apartments. Lies came to that conclusion because she felt some of the items their assessment said needed to be updated were not necessary. For the most part, this was because codes are dif-

ferent for historic properties and they are given leeway to protect historic qualities.

The only major expense, she said, was that the roof needed work. She estimated that would only cost a little more than \$300,000, all in.

She said there is nothing structurally that presents a danger to the public. It would only become dangerous, Lies said, if it were torn down. That would be from an environmental standpoint.

“When you take it down, you actually create a health hazard because of the things that are here,” Lies said. “When they talk about deconstruct, this building isn’t going to be taken down nicely, brick by brick and board by board. It’s going to be — smash, crush. That’s the only way to take it down. You can’t afford to take it down piece by piece.”

Maciej wrapped up testimony for the Friends of Hurrle Hall by reading the letter she received from MetroPlains. In it, they said if they were given the opportunity to pursue the property, they would need two months to conduct a feasibility study.

If it was determined that the location was feasible, they would submit an application

to secure tax credits from the state in May 2023. If its application were chosen to receive funding by the state Legislature, they would receive an award letter in December 2023. At that point, they would begin work toward acquiring the building.

“Why destroy our historical buildings for generations to come?” Maciej said. “Our kids and grandkids need to be able to see what was actually built back then. They’re not going to be able to see it with a little monument. They’re not going to be able to see it with a picture.”

Following testimony, the Council had an opportunity to ask questions. Council Member James Storlie asked what the Friends of Hurrle Hall or the developers’ estimates were to renovate the building for use as an apartment complex.

Francis said his requests to do a walk-through of the building have so far been denied. However, he has looked through blueprints and the previously done site assessments. He estimated the cost at \$4 million.

Council Member Raquel Lundberg asked Maciej if, in the six years since the Friends of Hurrle Hall successfully halted demolition, they had done any fundraising or come up with any money of their own to salvage the building.

“Are you referring that we were supposed to come up with the money or the Sisters?” Maciej asked.

She said they did have a developer interested, but that she “did not feel welcome” when she got a tour from the Sisters. She also noted that the Sisters have been “locked up” for over two years due to COVID-19.

“Would you please answer my question?” Lundberg said. “Have you done any fundraising?”

Maciej said they have, but those efforts have gone to “pay some of the bills that we’ve had.” She again said that, due to COVID, no prospective buyers could look at the building.

“During COVID, you could have had a GoFund-

Me page,” Lundberg said. “You had six years, and you could have raised \$4 million, maybe, in that amount of time.”

“We thought that the Sisters were going to be running some of the ads for it,” Maciej said.

Marc Manderscheid, legal counsel for the Sisters, led the testimony on their behalf. He said the situation was not a contest “between good and evil.” He said everyone involved wanted what was best for Little Falls.

He said the fate of Hurrle Hall was essentially sealed in 2002. At that time, the Sisters began to worry about their finances and facilities as their members were aging and membership was dwindling. Faced with a decision, they ultimately elected to renovate Mary Hall, rather than Hurrle Hall.

He said, when they got sued in 2016, the Sisters decided to “give the market a chance.”

“There seems to be a lot of anger directed against the Sisters, that maybe they haven’t done all that they should do,” Manderscheid said. “The Sisters stepped forward when challenged by people who meant well in the community, to see if there was another way.”

He said the Friends of Hurrle Hall and Rethos, in the time since, came forward with one developer, who was given a tour and a complete set of blueprints. He said he personally had multiple conversations with her, and she made it apparent no proposal was forthcoming.

“No proposal of any kind has been forthcoming until the last week,” Manderscheid said. “Nothing, for almost six years of time that has passed.”

He said it is “simply unfair” to blame the Sisters for not putting the building up for sale. It is a unique situation, he said, because the building is part of the Sisters’ campus. It is a short distance from Mary Hall, where some of them are living, as well as from the St. Francis Center, from where they continue to operate their ministry programs.

Manderscheid said in 2016, the Sisters developed a set of criteria they wanted to see in a developer before they considered an offer. They wanted an experienced developer, a definite plan for how the property would be used, a complete set of floorplans for all four floors and an understanding and certainty in terms of financing.

“No one with such a proposal has ever presented anything to the Sisters,” he said.

David Larson, whom Manderscheid said is more knowledgeable on the situation than anyone, was unavailable to speak at the HPC meeting, June 6. How-

ever, he gave testimony on behalf of the Sisters, Monday.

Larson said he has worked with the Sisters for more than 10 years, first with the property planning group and eventually with the Hurrle Hall sub-group. By trade, he is the vice president of facilities with CentraCare. As such he is in charge of all construction, remodeling, facilities operation and maintenance for all of CentraCare’s 10 hospitals.

He said Hurrle Hall, “really can’t be compared” to other residential or wood-framed buildings. Not only is the historic nature unique, but he said it is also not fed in a normal way from a utilities standpoint. It’s part of an interconnected campus.

He said, as the building sits today, it has some “base things” that need to be addressed. The roof is one of them, but he said there is also some structure underneath the roof that, after years of leaking, needs to be replaced. The full extent of that hasn’t been assessed yet.

He said the building also has asbestos shingles that would need to be abated and completely replaced.

“If the building were to use historic tax credits, to be part of a historic renovation, it would need to meet the historic renovation standards,” Larson said. “These numbers that you see in your packet don’t represent a historic renovation concept.”

He added that, though items like the staircases and doorways could meet historic standards, they would present a significant danger from a fire code standpoint if people were living in the building.

“This kind of money, as an investment in the community of Little Falls, would be much better served as another project that would offer not only the appropriate amenities up to code and what would be the ease of not being in a constrained campus that is the Franciscan campus,” Larson said.

Manderscheid noted, in closing, that Mary Hall — which was built in 1895 — is still there. The chapel is also there, which is also designated as a local landmark.

He said, while Hurrle Hall is an attractive building, the Sisters said their “good-byes” in 2016. They then reconsidered their actions in light of concerns from “well-meaning citizens of Little Falls.”

“There was some suggestion that it is kind of the Sisters’ fault because they

didn’t list the building for sale,” Manderscheid said “The building has never been for sale. What the Sisters said they would do is, working with the parties that sued them, they would seriously consider a proposal if a proposal came forward meeting some basic guidelines...”

He noted that the building has been sitting empty for six years, and that nobody was happy about the decision that had to be made. He ensured, however, that the Sisters were thoughtful, careful and thrifty throughout the process.

He said the members of the HPC took a similar approach with the information available to them in their decision to issue the permit.

“On behalf of the Sisters, the Sisters believe that the time has come, a decision needs to be made, and the Sisters ask that you affirm the decision of the Heritage Preservation Commission,” Manderscheid said.

He said the Sisters wanted to be remembered for what they did in the community, for their ministry, for the hospital and the schooling they provided, for their care of orphans and the elderly.

“That is how they would prefer to be remembered,” he said. “It is simply not a part of the Franciscan creed to be remembered by a building, but to be remembered by how they showed the love of God, and love of other persons.”

After testimony, Storlie asked if there was any room for negotiations between the developers that had recently expressed interest. Manderscheid said the Sisters do not intend to change the standards they set forth in 2016 when considering a sale. He reiterated that none of the interested parties have met those criteria.

Prior to the vote, Mayor Greg Zylka expressed that, despite the possibility of an affirmation of the HPC’s decision, the city does need “a lot of housing.” He said there was more to this decision, chiefly that they had to rule based on the recommendation of the HPC.

Storlie said he agreed, and he planned to vote to affirm the decision. He said the property is owned by the Sisters, and to separate a “little chunk” out of it to make it available to an outside source was not right.

“I’m going to honor the Sisters’ wishes and I will be — with a heavy heart — voting to approve that,” he said.

“It is simply not a part of the Franciscan creed to be remembered by a building, but to be remembered by how they showed the love of God, and love of other persons.”

— Marc Manderscheid



Staff photo by Zach Hacker

Kasella to retire after nearly 40 years with city

Monday marked the final council meeting for Little Falls Finance Director Lori Kasella after almost 40 years of service to the city. She was honored with a standing ovation from council members, city staff and members of the public in the gallery. “I wanted to offer my sincere thanks and gratitude for 40 years of service,” said City Administrator Jon Radermacher. Pictured are, from left, City Council members Frank Gosiak, Jerry Knafla, Leif Hanson, Brad Hircock, Raquel Lundberg, Mayor Greg Zylka, Council Member Wayne Liljegren, Kasella, Radermacher and Council Member James Storlie.

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This week's government meetings

The Pierz City Council meets at 7 p.m. Monday, June 27, at the Pierz Dining Center.

The Royalton School Board meets at 6 p.m. Monday, June 27, in the ECC Room/PK 15 (enter through door #2).

The Morrison County

Board of Commissioners will meet at 8:30 a.m. Tuesday, June 28, at the Morrison County Government Center.

The Pierz School Board meets at 6 p.m. Wednesday, June 29, in the high school media center.

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