

# Community members give input on Hurrle Hall decision

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Eight people gave input on how they believed the Little Falls City Council should vote, Monday, as it heard an appeal to the Heritage Preservation Commission's (HPC) June 6 decision to approve a demolition permit to the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls for Hurrle Hall.

Little Falls city code does not require the Council to host a public hearing on such matters. However, the Council chose to do so voluntarily to hear what citizens had to say. It was apparent to the Council in the two weeks leading up to the appeal hearing that many had strong emotions about the issue.

A total of three individuals spoke in support of the Sisters' decision to deconstruct the building, while five voiced their opposition.

Theresa Nygard was the first to approach the podium and express her desire to preserve Hurrle Hall. She is a residential real estate agent from Randall, and she stressed there is, contrary to assertions at the HPC meeting, options for the building — if the situation is handled properly.

"I'm just a residential agent, but I did look up the property and it's never been listed," Nygard said. "I can't find anything that shows it's been listed. If nobody knows it's for sale, it's going to be really hard to sell it or find somebody that wants to use it."

She stressed that commercial buildings, such as Hurrle Hall, do sell in Little Falls and provided a list of 20 agents who have handled large properties.

Nygard pointed out a recent study which stated Little Falls has a sizable deficit in rental properties. The sale of Hurrle Hall, she said, could help remedy that situation. Ultimately, she asked the Council to delay its decision for two years and to require that it be listed within 90 days.

She also questioned the estimated \$12.25 million



Staff photo by Zach Hacker

About 36 people packed into the Little Falls City Council chambers, Monday, during a public hearing for an appeal of the Heritage Preservation Commission's decision to issue a permit to demolish Hurrle Hall to the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls.

cost it would take to renovate and repurpose Hurrle Hall into apartments that was given to the Sisters.

"Every investor who comes to look at the property will do his own numbers and make his own calculations," Nygard said. "He won't rely on somebody else's numbers. He might restore the property differently than what the Sisters had intended for."

Mary Poser of Pierz, followed by reading a letter she wrote in 2016, when the Sisters' first attempt to demolish the building was, essentially, blocked by the Friends of Hurrle Hall via a lawsuit.

In it, she said that it was the Sisters who provided care, healing, comfort, education and good citizenship to the community, not the building. That ministry, she said, is what should be cherished, rather than structure.

She said there were other ways to honor the Sisters and memories made at Hurrle Hall than by saving the building. She suggested spending money through those means would be more meaningful than hiring a lawyer to sue the Sisters.

"If you think the building helped the Little Falls community and the surrounding area, you have a misplaced sense of community," Poser said. "The people, the Sisters, helped build this community."

She urged them to "let go

of the building" and "latch onto your spirit."

Lori Thoma, a resident of Little Falls, highlighted the historic nature of Hurrle Hall. She pointed out that it was built in 1891, and that it had been used for many purposes in the 130 years since.

Thoma said many other historic buildings in Little Falls have "kept their historical presence" but have been given new purposes.

"I just want to know what the City Council or our city wants to be known as?" Thoma said. "Are we still going to maintain the historic value? Is that what's drawing people to our town? Or, maybe they're just coming here for Walmart. I don't know."

Greg Spofford, also of Little Falls, came to express his support for the Sisters' decision. As a member of Oasis and someone who is active in the community in the area of helping the homeless, he said he initially thought

Hurrle Hall sounded like a "great place" to fill some of those needs. However, they did not have the money to purchase it.

He said, in the six years since the matter was temporarily settled, there has been plenty of time for a developer to come forward. That hasn't happened.

"I have great passion and respect for the people who are hoping to save it, as well," Spofford said. "But I've come to the decision on a personal basis that we need to honor the Francis-

can Sisters. It's best to honor the (HPC's) recommendation, as well, in terms of that."

Collin Francis of Little Falls, said he was interested in buying, renovating and repurposing Hurrle Hall as a mixed use development. He said he had acquired a partner for the project, and together they have \$250,000 with financing, which brings them to more than \$1 million.

Since he began to express interest, however, he said the Sisters have "refused" to talk to him. His only point of contact was their legal counsel, Marc Manderscheid, who he said "ignored" his request to walk through the building.

He said he made a "low offer" for the building, but it was rejected by the church. The reason was because

they wanted evidence of \$12 million in financing, a long track record of development and definitive plans for the building.

These are very unusual requirements from a would-be seller, although I do appreciate the church's concern for my

finances," Francis said.

Further, he said a seller "advertises a building" and does not worry about the buyer's renovation costs. He said his own estimates for the conversion of the building to apartments "diverge significantly" from figures given to the Sisters.

"I find the games being played here, where the church states a willingness to sell but behaves otherwise, to be odd," Francis said.

Richard Maciej, who has been heavily involved in the preservation of Hurrle Hall since 2016, said Little Falls needs to "work really hard" to keep its historic buildings standing. He said the fact a buyer has now come forward would benefit both the Sisters and the city.

Maciej said the Sisters could save the estimated \$1 million to \$1.1 million cost to deconstruct the building.

"The city wants more housing, there it is; just waiting for the buyer to use his skills and make Hurrle Hall shine and reusable," Maciej said. "What a win-win situation."

Rachel Schilling of Fort Ripley, said she respected the Sisters and understood it was a "very difficult" situation.

"I have a lot of love in my heart for this town, for the buildings, for the people, the community and especially the Sisters," Schilling said. "My family, we volunteered there and did a lot of stuff before the COVID pandemic."

She expressed a belief

that, if a fundraiser was put out to the community for the purpose of preserving Hurrle Hall, that it would be successful. She said the community is "known to come forward and shine."

While she acknowledged that the building and the property belongs to the sisters, she said it also belonged to the community, as it was originally donated to the Franciscans. She thought, if given the chance, the community would step up for them, again.

"I think it just needs to be asked for, and I think everyone would stand up and support the Sisters in that way," Schilling said.

Community Development of Morrison County Executive Director Carol Anderson reiterated some of the statements she made at the June 6, HPC hearing. She described her involvement with the Sisters in the decision-making process in regard to facilities for more than a decade.

She said it was a "very painful" decision for them.

"They have a limited amount of money," Anderson said. "They knew they wouldn't be able to take care of this building and be able to fulfill the vow they made to their members."

"They've been here for 130 years and they respect the community," she concluded. "It is their property. They have the ability to do with it what they want. Please respect the Sisters as they have respected the community for the last 130 years."

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