

October 23, 2009

Mr. Richard M. Daley, Mayor
City of Chicago
Office of the Mayor
City Hall - 121 N. LaSalle, Room 507
Chicago, IL 60602

Re: Demolition of Michael Reese Hospital

Mayor Daley:

On behalf of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, we are writing to express our concern about the proposed demolition of Michael Reese Hospital Campus (“Hospital”), including the City of Chicago’s recent destruction of an important landscape on the Hospital grounds designed by the firm of Sasaki and Novak. While we are disappointed that Chicago lost the bid for the 2016 Olympics, it now provides the City with an opportunity to determine the best prospective future use of the Michael Reese campus. We feel strongly that planning for the development of the site should recognize the needs of the surrounding neighborhood, reflect the architectural and historic value of Chicago’s built environment, and respond to the current economic climate. Immediate demolition of the Hospital without consideration of these factors is inappropriate.

Interest of the National Trust. Congress chartered the National Trust for Historic Preservation in 1949 as a private, charitable, educational, nonprofit corporation created to protect America’s historic resources and to facilitate public participation in the preservation of our nation’s heritage. See 16 U.S.C. §§ 461, 468. The National Trust is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has eight regional and field offices around the country, including the Midwestern Office in Chicago.¹ On behalf of approximately 250,000 members nationwide, including more than 10,000 in Illinois, the National Trust advocates for the preservation and protection of the Nation’s significant historic resources.

¹ The Supreme Court of Illinois has specifically recognized the National Trust as a special entity that may advance the public’s interest in protecting historic properties, stating that “it seems essential that, in order to perform its congressionally mandated functions, the National Trust must be allowed to maintain suits in State courts to prevent unlawful destruction of buildings it deems of national historic significance.” *Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois v. City of Chicago*, 125 Ill. 2d 164, 531 N.E.2d 9, 125 Ill. Dec. 830 (1988).

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The site of Michael Reese Hospital on Chicago's South Side is one of Chicago's greatest Modern architectural assets. At this site, Bauhaus founder Walter Gropius executed his only built work in the State of Illinois, comprising site planning, urban design, and the execution of individual buildings. Of the 30 plus buildings on the 37-acre Hospital campus, at least eight are known to have direct connection to Gropius as the designer. On March 13, 2009, the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA) determined that the Michael Reese Hospital Campus is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. A formal nomination for the Campus to the National Register of Historic Places has been submitted to IHPA and will be considered in December 2009 by the Illinois Historic Site Advisory Council.

The National Trust understands that the City is fast-tracking its plans to demolish all of Michael Reese Hospital's structures, excluding the 1907 Main Hospital Building and the Singer Pavilion. It is unfortunate that the City has already started interior demolition of some buildings, and has removed much of the Sasaki-designed landscape, completely leveling mature trees, shrubs, and greenspace. These structures and landscape features would have been an excellent setting for any redevelopment proposal on the campus.

Additionally, we raise the possibility that the demolition of the Michael Reese Hospital could negatively impact the ability of the City or any future developer to receive future federal assistance in developing potential proposals for the site. Demolition of National Register-eligible properties and landscapes may be viewed as an attempt to avoid future compliance with federal preservation laws, which would prohibit a federal agency from granting financial assistance for this site. See 16 U.S.C. § 470h-2(k). This statutory prohibition specifically limits federal agencies from approving any grant of a loan, loan guarantee, permit, license, or other assistance to an applicant,

who, with intent to avoid the requirements of section 106, has intentionally significantly adversely affected a historic property to which the grant would relate, or having legal power to prevent it, allowed such significant adverse effect to occur, unless the agency, after consultation with the [Advisory] Council, determines that circumstances justify granting such assistance despite the adverse effect created or permitted by the applicant.

Id.; 36 C.F.R. § 800.9(c)(1) (emphasis added). Although details of the financing for new construction on the site are as yet unclear, the City or a future developer may well seek federal and state assistance to redevelop the Michael Reese Hospital campus, or make use of federal tax incentives as part of their financing package, such as the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credits. Any form of federal assistance could be jeopardized by seeking to demolish properties on the campus that have been determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places,

Given these concerns, the City of Chicago should re-evaluate its current plans to demolish the Michael Reese Hospital campus. Not only does the significance of this site warrant a

more thoughtful approach to its disposition, but also the potential loss of future federal and state assistance should be carefully calculated. The interests of Chicago, as a city proud of its architecture and history, should support a more cautious and thoughtful process that will provide potential developers of the site with as many options as possible.

The National Trust would welcome the opportunity to discuss Michael Reese Hospital, and to work cooperatively to explore preservation-sensitive solutions that would allow for future development while protecting the sites significant buildings and landscape. Please feel free to contact our Midwest Office (312.939.5547), if you would like to discuss ways in which we can assist you with this issue.

Respectfully,


Elizabeth Merritt
Deputy General Counsel


Royce A. Yeater
Midwest Director

cc: Reid Nelson, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
Charlene Vaughn, Advisory Council on Historic Preservation
Chris Raguso, Chicago Department of Community Development
Erin Lavin Cabonargi, Executive Director, Chicago Public Building Commission
Patricia Scudiero, Chicago Department of Zoning and Land Use Planning
Brian Goeken, Deputy Commissioner, Historic Preservation Division, City of Chicago
Alderman Toni Perkwinkle, 4th Ward, City of Chicago
Jan Grimes, Director, IHPA
Anne Haaker, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer, IHPA
Jim Peters, President, Landmarks Illinois
Charles Birnbaum, The Cultural Landscape Foundation