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THE STING of Ursuline Academy's closure last year is still fresh for many who had ties to some part of the school's 150-year history in Springfield.

An annual list released this week brought up an issue that likely will be nearly as contentious.

Landmarks Illinois, which annually compiles a list of historic and endangered structures in Illinois, this year placed Ursuline Academy among the state's most at-risk, historically significant buildings. For those familiar with the Ursuline campus, that really means three buildings that are connected: the original school, built in 1867; its chapel, added in 1895; and Ursula Hall, an ornate concert hall built in 1908.

Now owned by Benedictine University, which is affiliated with Springfield College in Illinois, the structures are in a precarious situation.

URSULA HALL was long the home of SCI's music program, which no longer exists. It is unquestionably one of Springfield's most beautiful buildings, and like the Romanesque-style chapel was designed by Springfield's first licensed architect, William Conway. Yet it has for years been in desperate need of repair, and repairs to a building of this age are bound to be extremely expensive.

With Ursuline closed and SCI no longer offering a music program — and minus a major donor willing to foot the bill — it will be even more difficult for Benedictine/SCI to justify pouring money into Ursula Hall. That goes even more so for the original Ursuline school building.

Let's be clear here that Benedictine has announced no plans for the Ursuline buildings. When it does, it will face the question that so often makes historic preservation such a source of discord: Does preservation of these structures impede something that will bring greater benefits in the future? If the SCI/Benedictine partnership continues to thrive to a point where the university can substantially expand and update the campus, the answer may be no.

And yet...

THE SCI CAMPUS, through its preservation of the Brinkerhoff home, has long been a beacon for the benefits of mingling past grandeur with contemporary pragmatism. Within the last year, Springfield has seen another fine example of this in the Audubon Society of Illinois' decision to incorporate an 1850s-era farmhouse into its new headquarters at the Adams Wildlife Sanctuary. It had originally planned to raze the house but reconsidered after hearing out those in favor of preserving it.

That's why the listing of Ursuline on the Landmarks Illinois list is significant. The listing itself carries no legal import, but it already has stimulated discussion of the fate of the old school, Ursula Hall and chapel. More importantly, it has stimulated this discussion before the buildings' owners have made plans for them.

Ultimately, Benedictine may come up with a campus plan that justifies removing all or part of the old Ursuline. A modern college campus on Springfield's north end that compares favorably with the recent additions to the University of Illinois at Springfield certainly might trump historic preservation arguments. Or perhaps there could be a compromise, as with the Audubon headquarters.

The important thing is that this discussion is happening now. Too often, these discussions begin only when bulldozers are already rolling or when nature and neglect have already inflicted irreparable damage.