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January 16, 2019

(SENT VIA EMAIL)

Mr. Brent Ganahl, Chair  
Rock Island County Building Commission  
Rock Island County  
1504 Third Avenue  
Rock Island, IL 61201

Dear Chairman Ganahl and Members of the Public Building Commission,

I am writing this letter on behalf of Landmarks Illinois, the state's largest historic preservation advocacy organization, which was established in 1971.

From statements of public officials and the Public Building Commission's acceptance of demolition bids, it is apparent that the Public Building Commission of Rock Island County (the "PBCRIC") plans to demolish the building that formerly housed the Rock Island County Courthouse (the "Old Courthouse"). We, as well as many members of the Rock Island community, are of the opinion that the Old Courthouse is an important contributor to the heritage of Rock Island County, and is architecturally significant, and is reusable. Therefore, it should be preserved.

In addition to civic uses, the Old Courthouse could be rehabilitated and adaptively reused for residential and/or commercial purposes. If acquired for private development, the Old Courthouse would be placed on the property tax rolls for the first time, and would attract residents and commercial users to invest in and enliven downtown Rock Island. Federal and State tax incentives make this an attractive private development project. Therefore, demolition is premature; instead, the PBCRIC should explore alternatives that would lead to the retention, rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of the Old Courthouse. Adaptive reuse is a realistic goal for this building; one need only cite the example of Old Cook County Hospital in Chicago, which is now undergoing rehabilitation for use as private residences and a hotel, after being vacant for over 15 years.

Further, demolition of the Old Courthouse would be illegal at this time. The PBCRIC may not demolish or alter the Old Courthouse without first complying with the review procedures required pursuant to the Illinois statute known as Section 707. This statute, the Illinois State Agency Historic Resources Preservation Act, 20 ILCS 3420/1 et seq., provides that, before a project that can result in changes to the character of an historic resource, there must be a period of review and consultation by the Director of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). This review is designed to explore ways to avoid and minimize harm to the historic resource, with the expectation of reaching a Memorandum of Agreement setting forth a plan to mitigate the demolition, if it were to go forward.

Section 707 applies because the PBCRIC sought, and is required to have, a stormwater runoff permit from the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. The permit may not be issued, and the demolition may not occur, until the Section 707 review and consultation process is completed. Accordingly, it would be illegal to proceed with demolition at this time, in the absence of the permit from the Illinois EPA, and that permit requires prior compliance with Section 707.

In any event, it is doubtful that PBCRIC has the authority to undertake a demolition project for the Old Courthouse under the Public Building Commission Act, nor does it have the authority to use jail project bond proceeds to demolish the Old Courthouse.

We trust that, as a public agency, PBCRIC will follow the law and will not proceed with demolition. We expect the PBCRIC to comply with Section 707 and seek ways to retain this historic building. We are aware that preliminary preparation work for demolition, such as asbestos removal, has begun in the building. The PBCRIC should specifically and immediately halt any such work that would lead to demolition or substantial alteration of the Old Courthouse.

We hope there will be no need to do so, but Landmarks Illinois, along with appropriate other community members and organizations, is prepared to take legal action, if necessary, to assure compliance with the laws that protect historic resources, in order to protect the status quo. We have also been coordinating with the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which has been held to have inherent standing to enforce compliance with preservation laws in Illinois courts.

Sincerely,



Bonnie McDonald  
President  
Landmarks Illinois

cc: James W. Snider, Rock Island County Administrator  
Paul W. Edmondson, National Trust Interim President and CEO