

# PRESERVATION MATTERS

Special edition 2015

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION

## SAVING OUR SCHOOLS

This special edition newsletter primarily concerns two Champaign schools, Dr. Howard and Central High, but as you read the following articles you will see that the discussion overall encompasses far more than just the fate of these two buildings, the conversation also touches on the necessity for wise urban planning, proper land use, the importance of environmental sustainability, and the need for fiscal responsibility.

Preservation isn't simply saving old things just because we like them, it is the practice of taking care of what we have and finding ways to make them continue being useful; because we understand that physical spaces are inextricably linked to and are a part of the history of the people who have used them; because it is the wisest possible use of our limited resources; and because it just plain makes good sense.

Today we're here to speak on behalf of Champaign schools but tomorrow it will



very likely be another church or school near you because public buildings always embody the dichotomy of being utilitarian structures that are also a physical embodiment of our shared memories. As the former we want and need them to be as useful as possible, but as the latter we want them

to never change because they remind us of who we were and how we got to where we are today.

Thomas Garza

## THE 2015 DEBATE OVER THE FUTURE OF CHAMPAIGN SCHOOLS

As most people in Urbana-Champaign who follow the local news are no doubt well aware, Champaign schools have once again become a topic of heated conversation. PACA would like to share some information and perspective about the issues being discussed because as preservationists, we feel there are several areas of concern.

The recent debate regarding Champaign Central High and Dr. Howard Elementary Schools involves a proposal for construction of a new building at a new location for Central High, and demolition followed by new construction on the same site for Dr. Howard. The current buildings have long histories in their respective neigh-

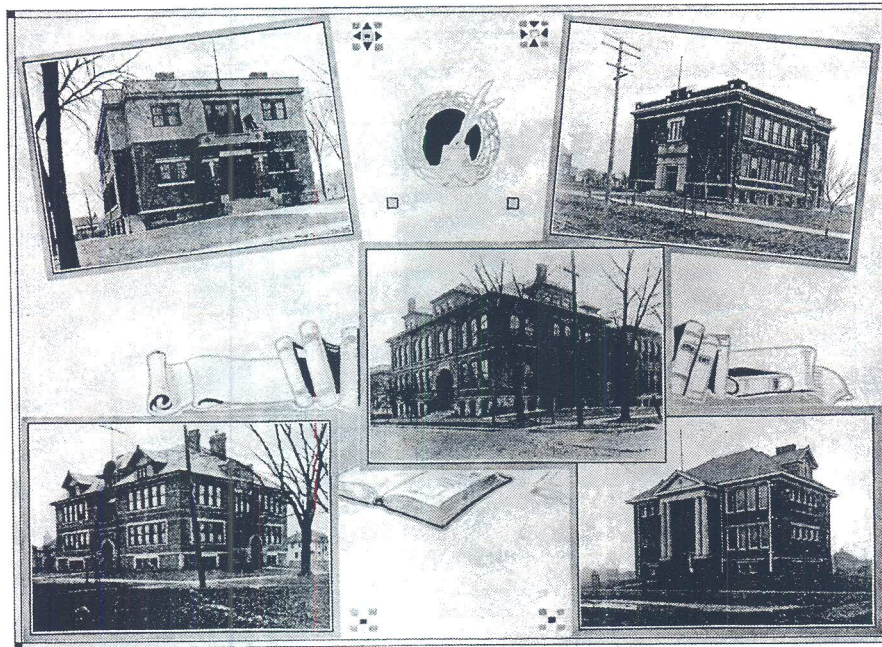
borhoods and are in good shape architecturally, however both facilities should be upgraded in order to improve accessibility and functionality. There are however, administrators and parents who feel that the buildings have become wholly inadequate in terms of space and needed amenities (e.g. parking, sports facilities, etc.) and they see complete replacement as the only viable option.

There are legitimate arguments concerning what is actually necessary as opposed to what is simply desired that we are not in a position to address. A sports-minded parent might feel that an indoor swimming pool or new football field is an absolutely mandatory addition; yet a more

scholastically-oriented family might feel that the real need is for more study space, or a state-of-the-art technology center. Ultimately it is up to the people of Champaign to decide what the full mandate of our schools should be. We at PACA however, would like to address the fate of these schools from a perspective that instead focuses on the coherence and continuity of the community as a whole, as well as the history and importance these schools have to their present neighborhoods in particular.

Let's begin with Dr. Howard Elementary School. Dr. Howard is located in a historic central Champaign neighborhood. It was built as a four-room school in 1910





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Col. Wolfe Marquette

PUBLIC SCHOOL BUILDINGS  
High School

Howard  
Lawhead

(at about the same time most houses in the area) on land donated by Dr. Hartwell C. Howard, one of Champaign County's first doctors. The school was expanded in 1920 followed by additions in 1931, 1953, and 1959. The school is also historically significant for its role in the 1940s U.S. Supreme Court's precedent-setting *McColum* ruling regarding separation of church and state. Additionally, Dr. Howard was one of the first schools in Champaign to offer educational opportunities for children with disabilities and one of the first to provide classes for gifted children.

The current Champaign Unit 4 School District's "New Unit 4 Referendum Plan" calls for replacement of Dr. Howard with a "new 21st century elementary school facility" at a cost of \$15 million. We do not, as of this writing, have an estimate for how much saving and renovating the existing structure would cost. However, we are confident it would certainly not exceed the \$15 million proposed for the new facility and would, in all likelihood, be significantly less.

There has been growing concern amongst preservationists about the demolition of older schools in old, established, and in some cases, historic neighborhoods. Alternatives such as renovating/upgrading interiors while maintaining the historic exteriors are rarely considered. Yet one only has to look to the University of Illinois for a long list of successful exam-

ples from Follinger Auditorium; Lincoln, Harker, Engineering and Smith Music Halls; the Illini Union, and the Chemistry and English buildings to the current work on the Natural History Building, among others. Urbana, too, has a good track record with this. Urbana High School improved their athletic fields and completed a major renovation of their theater. Leal Elementary School completed a new addition to their existing building thus allowing the school district to continue use of that historic facility.

Renovation and modernization of a building's interior does more than just save the one structure itself, it helps to maintain the coherence of the streetscape and retain the historic character of the entire neighborhood.

In regard to the question of "restoration or replacement", the National Trust for Historic Preservation recommends that feasibility study conducted by qualified architects and professionals with experience in the renovation and/or specialization in older school renovation, or close consultation between the architect and historic preservation agencies/ specialists. It also recommends community input and an assessment of the potential impact of demolition on the local community.

The other school in question is Champaign Central High School. While not currently threatened with demolition, the abandonment of Central High School and

construction of a new school for approximately \$95 million would have a negative impact on the community by disconnecting the school from the very heart of the community it purports to serve. Wherever a school located past the interstate highway would be, it would not be Central High anymore except in name only.

Central's current building is an impressive Art Deco-inspired structure built in the 1930s and located in the heart of old-town Champaign. According to the National Trust for Historic Preservation, such schools have a positive effect on communities as they bring together people who would otherwise remain strangers, and create a sense of community. Neighborhood schools were considered civic landmarks, and represented an investment in the community that inspired civic pride and participation in public life.

In closing, PACA supports the preservation and reuse of historic buildings in our community and opposes the unnecessary demolition or abandonment of such structures. We believe this should be a guiding principle whenever such questions arise in the future.

PACA was created to foster and encourage the preservation and conservation of the natural and built environment of Champaign County and East Central Illinois. We strive to heighten public awareness of the importance of Champaign County's history, and to strengthen the continuity between generations. Historic buildings are a tangible expression of the dreams and lives of people long gone, an entryway into the community's collective memory. PACA is dedicated to saving the buildings where this memory resides. Our cultural heritage, as represented in buildings, structures, and sites, can make a significant contribution to present day society. As the name implies, historic preservation seeks to identify and preserve these landmarks and districts for our use, education, observation, and pleasure. Preservation of our local historic resources creates a sense of civic pride in which all of us can share.

Brian Adams  
Thomas Garza  
Rich Cahill  
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## PRESERVING AND CONSERVING COMMUNITY

The Champaign Unit 4 School Board has recently purchased a large piece of property on the far northern edge of town on North Mattis, past Marketplace Mall. Their intention is to move the existing Central High School to that site. A referendum on the \$150 million issue is on the ballot in April. The sprawling land purchase, referendum, and ultimate abandonment of a well-constructed and significant centrally located high school has important, albeit negative, implications for the preservation and conservation communities and must be opposed.

The consequences of moving Central High School to such a distant location has not been well articulated by the school district. Consequences include the abandonment of schools already well integrated into existing neighborhoods, negative impacts to the existing urban core, and the general negative consequences associated with sprawl development – increases in vehicle miles and associated emissions, reduced opportunities for physical activity, higher property taxes, income segregation, increases in cost of city services, and a general erosion of social capital and loss of community. It also means the abandonment of an important community asset, the 1930s, Art Deco-inspired current school located in the heart of old-town Champaign.

The costs associated with such a move

have been similarly absent from the discussion. In a recent study, we found an additional \$160 million in subsequent costs to the community. These include tax abatement, loss in property values, additional travel costs, and costs associated with necessary infrastructure improvements (sidewalks and bike lanes). Transportation costs are increased due to the remote location and limited accessibility. Much of this projected expense will be borne by the families of students. This generates equity and fairness questions. Health costs result from a lack of active transportation options to the site. The tax implications of removing lands from the tax rolls that are currently planned and designed for residential and commercial development also contributes to long-term costs of the site. Additional costs include mass transit improvements needed (MTD estimates \$4.2M in additional fleet costs) and additional road and infrastructure improvements needed to service the site (about \$2M according to city of Champaign Engineers). The potential increases in cost for delivering important services to the site are also considered important in the study.

The Unit 4 school district decision to purchase 80 acres of edge land for a high school follows a path well-trod since the 1950s. Large area requirements and standards designed during the post war residential boom (i.e. massive

parking lots and innumerable turf grass athletic fields) pushed schools to the urban fringe where large parcels were readily available. In boom times, this can be an effective approach to siting, as communities subsequently fill-up around the site, effectively centralizing the location. Centennial High School is one example. In periods of low to slow growth or when available land for future development is limited, however, this sprawling campus approach is far less effective. In Champaign, space for residential development is limited in the area being pressed into service by the district, cut off by 2 interstate highways, commercial developments, and industrially zoned properties. At current densities, lands readily available for residential development in proximity to the site (i.e. north of I74), would result in just 24 additional school age children (34 total). This is coupled with current trends in the city that favor a micro urban approach to new development--higher densities, infill development, and a move away from sprawling edge developments – making a far northern site extremely unlikely of ever becoming well integrated into the community.

What is motivating the need for such a large tract of land for a new high school (Unit 4 has stated it needs around 70 acres)? Academics may not be the most important factor in the Unit 4 Central High School relocation decision. The top 4 high schools in terms of academic achievement in the state (North Side Prep, Walter Payton High School, Jones Preparatory High School, and Whitney Young High School), are all located within the city limits of Chicago, our most densely populated city, on as little as 1 acre of land (each school is on less than 8). In reality, the apparent driver for siting appears to be competitive athletics. In Illinois, the State Board of Higher Ed guidelines on School Construction Project Standards states that only 20 acres are needed to satisfy state land requirements, but they require only fields needed for physical education. And in the case of Chicago, athletic fields are a shared responsibility with





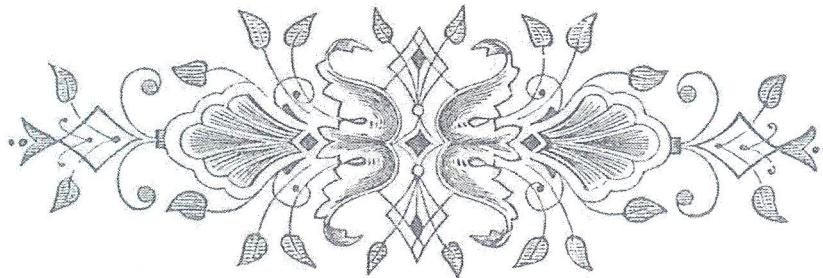
the Chicago Park District, where they have shared facilities and stadiums that service more than one high school. The removal of competitive athletic fields from siting requirements in the Central High School case opens the door to a broad range of potential sites, including the existing school area, that are already well integrated into the social fabric of the community.

The importance of developing or maintaining a sense of community and strong social capital in school siting decisions is often overlooked. In a 2001 study, Israel et al. found that, "... attributes of social capital are key factors affecting high school students'

educational achievement." These findings suggest that school districts should seek to strengthen social capital in the areas surrounding their schools in order to improve student educational achievement. In the case of the far north edge site, the lack of community at or near the site hurts its potential to build a strong social network around the school. District administrators are in the process of evaluating ways to manage a potential increase in enrollment of approximately 340 students over the next 10 years. If a new building is constructed to accommodate this potential demand, a considerable expense will be born by the community, both in terms of direct

expenses – acquisition, construction and operation of an additional building – and in terms of indirect community costs – transportation, infrastructure, and social costs. It will also cause a loss of community and the degradation of a now thriving neighborhood in Central Champaign.

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## PRESERVATION MATTERS

*The newsletter of the*



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