

REMARKS

LANDMARKING OF HISTORIC DETROIT HOTEL

COMMUNITY PRESERVATION COMMISSION

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The Detroit Hotel is the most historic building in St. Petersburg. After the coming of the Orange Belt Railroad in 1888 and construction of the small train station the Detroit Hotel was the first significant building to be constructed in the new town of St. Petersburg. It was built by city co-founders Peter Demens and John C. Williams, Sr. As the new town was to be named after Peter Demens home city in Russia, St. Petersburg, the hotel was named after John C. Williams' hometown Detroit, Michigan. The Detroit Hotel, and those associated with it, played a significant role in the city's founding and later development.

The Detroit is a recognized contributing structure to the Downtown National Historic District. It was also identified by the City in the Mayor's 2006 Historic Preservation Summit as a property meriting local landmark designation. In 1988, as part of the City's Centennial Celebration, the then owners of the Detroit, Robert Barnes and William Pendergast, placed a bronze plaque in front of the hotel commemorating the Detroit as the city's first hotel. The plaque remains there to this day.

The City Code sets forth criteria for the designation of local landmarks. The historic Detroit Hotel we believe is significant at the local level in the areas of Community Planning and Development, Commerce, Social History, and Architecture and meets at least three criteria set forth in the ordinance (16.30.070.2.5 (D)):

1. Its value is a significant reminder of the cultural or archaeological heritage of the City, state or nation.
3. It is identified with a person or persons who significantly contributed to the development of the city, state, or nation.
6. It has distinguishing characteristics of an architectural style valuable for the study of a period, method of construction, or use of indigenous materials.

We note that the staff report is in agreement with all of the identified areas of significance and criteria except architecture. While we believe the historic Detroit, including its two masonry vernacular wings, bear architectural significance for the study of a "period, method of construction, or use of indigenous materials," we note that it is

only necessary for the historic Detroit to meet a single area of significance and criterion to justify landmarking.

We also note that the Detroit Condominium Association letter received yesterday does not dispute the great historic importance of the Detroit Hotel, and states “The Board appreciates the Hotel’s value to the broader St. Petersburg community and our storied history.”

We will briefly speak to the areas of significance and justification criteria:

Community Planning and Development

As the first hotel in the city, the Detroit Hotel was constructed in conjunction with the railroad depot to encourage the settlement and growth of the new community. The building of the Hotel was a strategic decision to promote the community’s future growth. The Detroit jump-started and anchored development of the downtown. It provided a quality hostelry for those interested in town investment and for tourists. By providing lodging for prospective residents, the hotel supported the early growth of the city. A number of new residents likely stayed at the Detroit when they first visited the city and while awaiting construction of a residence. Its construction is intimately associated with two of the city’s three founders, John C. Williams, Sr., originally from Detroit, and Peter Demens, a Russian immigrant. But it is also associated with other early pioneers of our city, many of whom were African American, who helped build the railroad and brought it to the city, and who constructed its first most significant building.

Commerce

As the “Queen Mother” of St. Petersburg’s hotels the Detroit paved the way for the city’s tourist economy and development. While the hotels themselves provided employment to thousands of local residents, more importantly they indirectly provided employment for others in a wide range of local businesses. It was the Detroit that led the way in development of the city and the tourist economy for which we are so well known.

In addition to its function as a hotel, the Detroit also directly housed many businesses. Between 1926 and 1985 some 53 businesses were located in the Detroit Hotel (City of St. Petersburg property card). The Detroit housed some of the city’s most active businesses and was associated with some of the most significant members of the community including John C. Williams, Peter Demens and the Orange Belt Railway, C. Perry Snell, Mayor Frank Fortune Pulver, City Councilman Bainbridge Hayward, Hubert Rutland, and Ida Nancy Merrill and the Charles Brazier Family.

Social History

The Detroit Hotel greatly facilitated the early social and cultural life of the city, and for a long time served as the city’s social center. It was a gathering place for community

leaders after critical city events such as the occurrence of a hurricane. In 1897 with the introduction of electricity in our town there was a day of celebration culminating in a grand ball at the Detroit Hotel. The influential Woman's Town Improvement Association originated at the Detroit. Many clubs had their meetings at the Detroit. Among these were the Rotary Club, the Zonta Business Women's Club, and the Young Republican Club. We have already mentioned some of the hotels' owners. The Detroit's guests also included many accomplished persons who not only enjoyed visiting our city, but also often contributed to the cultural and intellectual enrichment of the city. Some of these were William Jennings Bryan, Babe Ruth, Will Rogers, Clarence Darrow, the St. Louis Cardinals, Eleanor Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Jim Morrison, and Ringo Starr.

Architecture

The Detroit Hotel is composed of three major components, the original 1888 Victorian/Queen Anne style building, the 1911 west Masonry Vernacular wing, and the 1913 Masonry Vernacular east wing. All of these components have their historic importance. While the original Victorian/Queen Anne building has been compromised by major renovations over the years, it is the only major building remaining from the city's birth, and also remains on its original site. Much of the original building core remains, as does the decorated dominant brick chimney. We believe it meets the City's criterion #6 as being "valuable for study of a period, method of construction, or use of indigenous materials." The original 1888 section dates from the first year of the city's founding. For purposes of architectural and construction study, there is no other such significant building remaining still dating from the year of the city's birth.

The Detroit's brick wings are good examples of the Commercial or Masonry Vernacular style. They are largely unornamented, except for their key stone lintels and cornice (1911 wing). They are exactly the kind of building that fits an early 20th Century Main Street. They are also valuable for study of the city's earliest architecture, construction techniques, and use of building materials.

Final Points

It is noted that the President of the Detroit Condominium Association and other residents have stated their objection to the landmarking of the Hotel Detroit at this time. Both Saint Petersburg Preservation and the City have sought to obtain the owners support through various meetings and other contacts dating at least back to 2007. Extensive information has been provided regarding studies relating to property appreciation, tax advantages, and transfer and sale of development credits. We will continue to provide such information and meet with the owners upon request.

The landmarking ordinance does not require owner support and it is not a stated criterion for the Commission to consider. The City has approved designation of local landmarks on at least four occasions in the past (Sunken Gardens, Manhattan Casino, Henry-Bryan, and Seaboard Railway). The historic significance of the Detroit is even greater than the significance of these earlier landmarkings approved without owner support as important as these may be.

In summary, the historic Detroit Hotel is the city's most historic building, dating from the city's birth. It is intimately connected with two of the city's founders, John C. Williams and Peter Demens, as well as numerous other city leaders. The hotel was a strategic component of the city's earliest planning and development. As the "Queen Mother" of St. Petersburg's hotels the Detroit paved the way for the city's tourist economy and development. The Detroit Hotel greatly facilitated the early social and cultural life of the city, and for a long time served as the city's social center. For purposes of architectural and construction study, there is no other such significant building remaining still dating from 1888.

If any building ever deserved designation as a local landmark, the historic Detroit Hotel is that building.