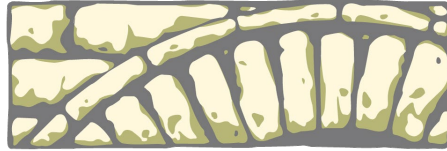


MADISON TRUST



for Historic Preservation

Advocacy News

November 2022

Update – The Old Spring Tavern Fight Continues

By Rick Chandler

Previous issues of the Advocacy News ([September 2022](#)) and Advocacy Opinion ([August 2022](#)) covered a proposal to build a new house on the historic west yard of the Old Spring Tavern property on Nakoma Road. The Madison Trust continues to fight to preserve this property in its historic form and encourages concerned citizens to help in this process.

The important thing to know is that the debate is not over and there are still many actions we can take to try to prevent adverse changes to this historic property. As discussed in further detail below, those who are concerned about the issue can write letters to newspapers and be prepared to register against or testify against any proposal to build an inappropriate structure on the landmarked lot when an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness is considered by the Landmarks Commission.

Background

The Old Spring Tavern, built in 1854, is a Madison landmark consisting of the original red brick tavern and inn and the surrounding yard and grounds, located at 3706 Nakoma Road and also bordered by Spring Trail and Council Crest. The property was officially designated as a Madison Landmark in 1972 and is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

The building was an inn during the stagecoach era, serving people traveling between Madison and southwest Wisconsin. It has been a private residence for more than 100 years, with a succession of owners who have been good stewards and have preserved the historic appearance of the home and grounds.

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Perspective from the driveway entrance to the Tavern/Inn site.
Courtesy of Kevin Pomeroy

Recap of recent events

In April 2022, a developer bought the property and proposed dividing the parcel into two new lots with a plan to build a new house on the currently open west side of the property facing Council Crest.

The parcel division was narrowly approved by the Madison Landmarks Commission in July and finalized by the Common Council in early September. Both parcels retain the landmark designation.

In September, the newly divided lots were sold to separate buyers. Details about the buyers and their plans are not yet available, but it is likely that there will be a proposal to build a house on the historic west yard.

Next steps

There are more steps required before a house can be built on the new lot. The Landmarks Commission will have to review any proposal for a new structure and would have to grant a Certificate of Appropriateness before a building permit can be issued.

The relevant ordinance is Sec. 41.18, which reads as follows:

A certificate of appropriateness shall be granted only if the proposed project complies with this chapter, including all of the following standards that apply.

(1) New Construction or Exterior Alteration. The Landmarks Commission shall approve a certificate of appropriateness for exterior alteration or construction only if:

(a) In the case of exterior alteration to a designated landmark, the proposed work would meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

(b) In the case of exterior alteration or construction of a structure on a landmark site, the proposed work would meet the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

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(c) In the case of exterior alteration or construction on any property located in a historic district, the proposed exterior alteration or construction meets the adopted standards and guidelines for that district.

(d) In the case of any exterior alteration or construction for which a certificate of appropriateness is required, the proposed work will not frustrate the public interest expressed in this ordinance for protecting, promoting, conserving, and using the City's historic resources.

The timing of future action by the Landmarks Commission depends on a proposal for new construction. The Landmarks Commission will schedule a review of any proposal for a Certificate of Appropriateness. There may be as little as 10 days' notice to the public, in the form of post cards sent to nearby homeowners.

Concerns

There continue to be many concerns about the possible construction of a new structure. A new house on the west yard could be very visually intrusive, looming over the historic tavern and dramatically impacting the historic appearance of the property. Up until now, the prominence of a solitary historic building set on a road in an open landscape has been maintained, an admirable achievement by a succession of owners.

If a new house was two stories tall in the front facing Council Crest, it would be three stories tall in the back because of the steep slope of the property. Even though setback requirements would keep the new construction at least 70 feet from the front door of the Old Spring Tavern, it seems clear that a three-story rear façade that is 25 yards or so from the front of the tavern would be a significant visual intrusion.

Beyond that, building a new house that would occupy the bulk of the west yard would dramatically change the open look and feel of the area that has been a distinguishing characteristic of the overall landmark property. Among other uses, the west yard served as a source of clay for the bricks for the tavern, as a place where stagecoaches unloaded passengers at the tavern, and as a site for an outhouse and chicken coop serving the property up until the 1920s.

Another concern is that construction of a new house could kill a historic black walnut tree on the property which is estimated to be up to 300 years old and which has been noted as one of the 100 most significant trees in Wisconsin. The tree predates the stagecoach era and is considered an integral part of the landmark site. Arborists who have looked at the property have explained that the root structure of the tree extends about 1.5 times further than its canopy, so the root system extends under almost all of Lot 2, which means that any major construction on Lot 2 would severely stress the tree.

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What can concerned citizens do?

At this point, people can do several things:

1. Write [letters to the editor](#) of the Wisconsin State Journal. The debate about the Old Spring Tavern was the subject of a [front-page story in the paper](#) by Dean Mosiman on September 28, and letter writers could write to thank the paper for covering this important topic and state their reasons for opposing new construction.
2. Be prepared to register against or testify against a proposal to build an inappropriate structure on the new lot when an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness is considered by the Landmarks Commission.
3. [Sign up for our new Advocacy Alerts](#), which the Madison Trust Advocacy Committee is currently working to establish. As soon as it's up and running, those on the list will receive updates and information on selected advocacy-related issues in our community. This would include updates about the Old Spring Tavern.

Conclusion



Photo courtesy of Kevin Pomeroy

The Old Spring Tavern is one of Madison's better known historic landmarks due to its location on a large lot along a main thoroughfare. We hope you share the concern that an inappropriate structure would damage the historic character of this landmark property. The Madison Trust seeks to engage all interested parties in the preservation of our shared cultural resources. We encourage you to get involved to support our ongoing efforts. We will keep you posted about further developments.

