Executive Policy Committee
February 16, 2022

My name is Michel Lagacé and I am speaking on behalf of the Société historique de Saint-Boniface whose board I chair. Before the pandemic, we were pleased to welcome most of you to our three-story archives centre at 340 Provencher Blvd., down the street from the property at 227 Provencher Blvd.

It's important to recall that the civic square created around l'Hôtel de ville of St. Boniface during the 1960's sought to consolidate the identity of the then City of St. Boniface. It reflected the community's will to build its own identity in the face of urban expansion that would lead to the disappearance of the City and the amalgamation of 13 civic entities to constitute the present City of Winnipeg in 1972. It was designed to be the very heart of francophone Manitoba by the person who is probably Manitoba's most recognized architect, Étienne Gaboury.

The buildings that now constitute the existing carré civique – the city hall, the fire hall, the court house at 227 Provencher and the former Health Unit Building now occupied by the Festival du Voyageur at 233 Provencher – continue to be powerful symbols of this sense of identity 50 years after amalgamation. They are significant legacies for people who have struggled for many years to thrive in a sometimes hostile environment. They are concrete reminders of the unique history of this part of Western Canada.

The Standing Policy Committee on Property and Development, Heritage and Downtown Development heard an appeal on September 22 last year by M. Marc Fréchette, the owner of 227 Provencher Blvd. He outlined the costs of renovating the building he purchased ten years ago. He spoke of adding ramps and installing sinks in the offices, repairing the roof and improving the HVAC system.

None of these costs has anything to do with the nomination of the building as an historic resource. They will have to be incurred regardless of any such designation. As he had to know when he bought the building almost ten years ago, they are necessary if he wishes to it as a health centre.

Most tellingly, Marc Fréchette went on to praise the qualities of the building: the lab, the gym and the offices he described as beautiful. He was even pleased that the windows are small and do not allow people outside the building to look inside. The elements he praised are those that would be protected by being placed on a list of historic resources.

M. Fréchette has not yet identified any costs that would be attributable to a heritage designation. Not surprisingly, he dismissed a suggestion that he could apply for grants if expenses were to be incurred due to any heritage requirements, saying that that would be too cumbersome. "What is an additional expense?", he asked. And "How do you quantify the cost and convey it to a grants committee?" Of course, the difficulty is that he has identified no such costs. Those he is talking about are attributable solely to bringing the building up to code, expenses that would not be affected by a heritage designation.

After praising what he called the “beautiful, gorgeous building”, M. Fréchette stated that “designation is a moot point.” Exactly, designation has become a bogeyman devoid of any reality.

For reasons that are not clear, Mr. Schulz of Manitoba Possible has voiced his objections to the designation of the building at 227 Provencher Blvd. at the same Standing Policy Committee meeting. This building is not a part of the campus he has proposed for the area next to the old City hall, and the reasons for his objections to the designation of a building his organization does not own are not clear. In any case, nothing prevents him or M. Fréchette from proposing whatever they want to do with the sites they own. Their proposals would have to be approved by the City.

Designation will not prevent changes to make the building functional today. The St. Boniface Museum at 494 Taché Avenue is a case in point. It’s a designated building that dates back to the 1840’s. An elevator has been added, modern washrooms have been installed as well as an upgraded electrical and plumbing system and climate control. Designation as an historical resource has not been an impediment to modernization. The City can allow modifications as required, provided that the protected elements listed in the designation are respected.

Indeed, Étienne Gaboury, the architect of the building at 227 Provencher Blvd., has clearly indicated that a heritage designation should not impede the proper reuse of the building “provided that the architectural integrity of the buildings is maintained”. And the main features of the building, like the exterior, are precisely the elements that Marc Fréchette states he does not want to change. M. Gaboury himself has no objection to adding access ramps, changing doors to make the building accessible or changing the garage doors to make a window wall. Clearly, the building must be functional if it is to have a future.

Since Mr. Schulz’ remarks are on the record, I must take strong objection to his characterization of opponents to his point of view as a small obstructionist minority that simply wants to obstruct. He obviously does not know the community. I have been a volunteer for over 40 years in this city and I would challenge Mr. Schulz to find any evidence of obstruction in my activities.

Mr. Schulz might wish to reconsider his decision to insult his neighbours before even moving into a new neighbourhood. To my knowledge, the community supports the work and objectives of Manitoba Possible and Mr. Schulz does his organization no service by indulging in gratuitous insults.

Many people who support the designation of the building at 227 Provencher Blvd. want Mr. Fréchette’s project to succeed. The building still has to be restored 10 years after he bought it and this lengthy delay has obviously not been caused by any designation as an historical resource.

Indeed, the City has been remiss in not seeing to this designation a long time ago and the owner had to know its importance, both artistic and historical, would qualify for historical designation, as the Historical Buildings and Resources Committee has already determined.

In summary, there is nothing an historical designation would do to impede the reuse of the building at 227 Provencher. And since the building next door at 233 Provencher Blvd. has already received that designation, it would be highly inconsistent for the City not to provide the same protection to the building at 227 Provencher Blvd.

I therefore support the recommendation of the Historical Buildings and Resources Committee that St. Boniface Police Station/Jail/County Courthouse, 227 Provencher Boulevard, be added to the List of Historical Resources.