

Possible Inclusion of the Meeting House on the listing in the National Register of Historic Places

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INTRODUCTION

On June 12, 2022, the Building and Grounds Sub-Council voted 12-0 to continue to pursue for the Unitarian Meeting House listing in the National Register of Historic Places, as recommended by its National Register Subcommittee.

The Subcommittee, consisting of Toni Gold, Convenor, Laura Cipriano and Jim Venneman, had met four times since early May to consider such a listing. They consulted with several other members of USH, studied the implications of listing, and could uncover no significant reasons not to proceed. On Sunday July 17 following the service, a congregation hearing was held about this proposal. Approximately 36 members of the congregation attended a question-and-answer session lasting more than an hour receiving a presentation by subcommittee members assisted by Mary Falvey, Executive Director of the Hartford Preservation Alliance (HPA), a local nonprofit. Subsequently, questions were received and discussed as well as recorded for further consideration.

Following is a condensed and reorganized summary of that session.

What is the National Register of Historic Places?

The National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the Nation's historic places worthy of preservation. Authorized by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, the National Park Service's National Register is part of a national program to coordinate and support public and private efforts to identify, evaluate, and protect America's historic and archeological resources. The National Register was created to protect historic structures, which were being destroyed wholesale at that time in cities all over the country by the construction of the Interstate Highway System. See: <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/nationalregister/index.htm>.

How is the Meeting House qualified?

The Meeting House is qualified because it is an outstanding example of the mid-century modern architectural style, and is designed by a distinguished architect, Victor Lundy. Now that it is over 50 years old, it has become eligible for listing in the National Register. Once a detailed research and write-up has been done, and it is accepted by the Connecticut State Review Board, the nomination will then be forwarded to the National Register of Historic Places of the National Park Service, which will probably accept the recommendation to officially list it.

We have been determined to be eligible by Jenny Scofield from the Connecticut Historic Preservation office. She prepares the final editing of applications for the National Register. She visited our Meeting House, spent time taking pictures and discussing our history, and encouraged us to move forward, as our building is of adequate age and architectural distinction.

What are the implications of National Register listing?

Listing on the National Register of Historic Places automatically places a property on the Connecticut Register of Historic Places (the entire program is administered at the state level), and also brings it under the jurisdiction of Hartford's Historic Preservation Ordinance.

What is affected by a listing? The exterior only—what can be seen from the street. If the work requires a building permit, then the City of Hartford, as part of its regular permitting review, will ask for approval from its Historic Preservation Review Board, made up of knowledgeable citizens who will not oppose a change that meets National Register criteria. The standard is to repair with same or similar materials. If you are changing the material on the roof, as going from shingles to tiles, then you need a review. Landscaping is not covered.

What about demolition?

The questions that will be asked of a proposed demolition are: 1. are there reasonable and 2. feasible (as measured by the expense of the change) alternatives? These are the two criteria that apply to such a situation. This causes most owners to contemplate alternative plans to demolition. There would be a review and usually there is an alternative worked out.

What about doubling our solar area?

If observable from the street such would require a review.

Our concrete and cable construction is subject to maintenance. The cabling is very robust and likely to survive the rest of the building should it deteriorate. We have and will be taking further steps to treat the concrete to maintain its strength.

What about windmills, geothermal, etc.?

Geothermal is mostly approved and examples were given. Such installations preserve the building contents and do not change its appearance. You can install central air, for example.

How Do We Get Listed; how long would the listing process take, and what would be involved?

The process would probably be about two years from start to finish. The Hartford Preservation Alliance (HPA), a local nonprofit of which Mary Falvey is the Executive Director, has proposed, for \$1,500, to help us prepare a funding request to the Connecticut Historic Restoration Fund for \$15,000 to help us prepare and administer a state Survey and Planning Grant that would defray the cost of hiring a qualified historic consultant who would actually research and write the National Register nomination. The estimated cost of the consultant is \$15,000. The grant would cover 50% of this cost (including HPA's fee). There is a slight possibility that the 50% match for the grant could be waived. If our request is funded, Mary would help us select such a consultant, - an architectural historian from the state's approved list – to do the research and writing and guide us in an appearance before the Connecticut Preservation Review Board. Last month B&G allocated \$1,500 from its budget to potentially fund the initial HPA work.

Is there access to funding for restoration?

If included on the Register, yes. Matching grants are available up to \$200K from the state's Historic Restoration Fund. This fund would also support the preparation of a long-term planning document used to seek funding for various construction phases over the next 20 years or so.

Where does the money come from? From the Connecticut Community Reinvestment Fund, which is funded from a modest tax on real estate closings.

What are the requirements of grant funding?

If you receive restoration funds, then the state will put an easement on the property requiring the money be spent for the purpose intended. There is also a requirement that the building be opened to the public periodically — a requirement we already meet.

What about matching funds?

We would need to raise a one-to one match. Banks react affirmatively to such match funding.

One opportunity for 200k only?

No, you can do it again, or may change going forward.

Can renewable energy be considered as preservation?

Yes; now there are guidelines even for solar. No problem with heat pumps.

Can we change the color of the roof?

Current rules permit painting any color you wish.

What if we wanted to sell the building?

The Unitarian Society of Hartford owns the building and could sell to any buyer for any purpose. If the new owner wanted to make physical changes to the interior, the rules would permit them to do so.

What about church and state separation?

No relevance here. Where churches are concerned, the criteria are restricted to architectural matters excluding religious considerations thus respecting separation of church and state. For us, the listing would be based on architectural attributes only.

If our church were sold and we moved, would the Memorial Garden be an issue?

Our memorial garden can be moved symbolically by current policy if necessary and would not be a barrier to sales.

After a thorough study, the Committee did not find a significant downside to the nomination recommending moving forward as subsequently recommended by the full B and G Sub-Council.
