

Ilitch-owned building's demolition delayed

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Council member to seek possible ways to preserve it.

The Detroit City Council on Tuesday delayed the demolition of a derelict and long-vacant Ilitch-owned building in the Cass Corridor.

The nine-member body unanimously voted to hold off on razing the two-story brick building, 3143 Cass Ave., until September. The extra time is to allow Council member Gabriela Santiago-Romero to research potential ways to preserve the property. The city initially sought the building's demolition because of its poor condition, an official said.

In a letter Friday, Santiago-Romero urged the city's Buildings, Safety Engineering and Environmental Department (BSEED) to pause demolition so that the building's historic significance can be considered.

The building has been vacant for years and portions of the roof are collapsed. Decades ago, that area along Cass was considered Detroit's Chinatown.

"I'm going to use the time to identify partners, developers and resources ... and we'll see what we can do. At the end of the day, if there's nothing that we can do to save the property, that's OK. But I want to be fair to say that I did my job and that I tried," Santiago-Romero told the Free Press. "It was approved to be demolished in 2018. So they've been sitting on this for a while. For me, I'm like, 'Why not another month?'" BSEED Director David Bell has requested a legal opinion on whether the city council action "has any legal authority," said Georgette Johnson, BSEED spokeswoman, on Tuesday after the vote.

"It is his position that the various portions of the roof and interior walls have already collapsed in the interest of public safety, needs to come down as soon as possible," she said.

Olympia opted to demolish the building on its own, as opposed to having the city tear it down, Johnson said.

Olympia's plans for the property after demolition - if any - were not immediately clear.

According to a representative for Olympia Development of Michigan, the Ilitch family organization's real estate firm, they chose a contractor to raze the building only after the city sought the building's demolition by issuing, on May 10 a "Notification of Demolition" for the property.

"We wish to remain in good standing with the city of Detroit on this issue and will comply with the city," Olympia Development said in a statement Tuesday night. "We remain committed to our redevelopment efforts throughout the District Detroit."

Officials discussed the possibility of pursuing an interim historic designation, which Santiago-Romero requested in the letter to BSEED, adding it would pause demolitions for at least a year.

"The idea is if we've identified enough progress and momentum, the next step would be to request the interim designation," Santiago-Romero said.

Janese Chapman, director of Detroit's Historic Designation Advisory Board, told council members the building was originally a house that became the Chinese Merchants Association building, and that she would provide a report with more information on the property.

"It is not locally designated at this time," Chapman said. "We would like the time to do some additional research on the property. ... Our report will include both the historical and potential significance for our property, as well as the developmental history of the community."

In Santiago-Romero's letter to BSEED, the council member noted the property began as a residence in 1883 and was purchased by the Chinese Merchants Association in 1963. The association served as a localized government with elected members from the Chinese community, which used the space to connect the community with jobs, activities for youth and seniors, and events.

"With this knowledge, it's unquestionable that 3143 Cass Ave. is a major contribution to the Chinatown Historic District and an undeniable part of our city's rich history of diversity," Santiago-Romero said in the letter. "We must also acknowledge how this area came to be known as Chinatown: the Chinese and Chinese American community were displaced from Michigan Ave. and Third Street due to 'urban renewal' as noted on a Michigan State Historic Preservation Office form.

"And yet, despite being forced to start anew, with time, this community became a destination, earning its rightful designation as Chinatown."

It once neighbored another Ilitch-owned building that was destroyed by fire in 2019 and had once housed the Gold Dollar bar, where the White Stripes played their first show.

Dana Afana is the Detroit city hall reporter for the Free Press. Contact her: dafana@freepress.com or 313-635-3491. Follow her on Twitter: @DanaAfana.

Contact JC Reindl: 313-222-6631 or jcreindl@freepress.com.



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