

**City of Detroit**  
**CITY COUNCIL**

**HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD**

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January 17, 2024

Mr. Scott Bowen, Director  
Department of Natural Resources  
Executive Division  
P.O. Box 30028  
Lansing, MI 48909

*RE: Belle Isle Boathouse - DNR proposed demolition*

Dear Director Bowen,

The Historic Designation Advisory Board (HDAB) is deeply concerned about the Department of Natural Resources' (DNR) proposal to utilize American Rescue Plan Act funds (ARPA) to demolish the historic Belle Isle Boathouse. We understand the deteriorating condition of the building poses a difficult choice for the DNR regarding the best use of public funds. However, this extremely important and irreplaceable building, one of the island's most visible and historic structures, should be prioritized for stabilization until a long-term use and renovation plan is developed.

HDAB commends the DNR's work in funding and overseeing the renovation of other important Belle Isle structures, such as the Belle Isle Conservatory, Aquarium, the Belle Isle Casino and Scott Fountain. The Belle Isle Boathouse, built in 1902 in a distinctive Mediterranean-style, is in a rare category of the nation's oldest existing and continuously used boathouses, which includes Philadelphia's Boathouse Row. This iconic building, owned by the City of Detroit and under the oversight of the State of Michigan through its long-term lease agreement of Belle Isle, equally deserves financial investment. The building should be regarded as both an important historic and educational resource for Detroit citizens and visitors alike. Since the 1970s, Friends of Detroit Rowing, through partnerships with the Detroit Public Schools and the Detroit Parks and Recreation Department, has provided Learn to Row programs and outdoor recreation activities to thousands of kids at the Belle Isle Boathouse.

While the future of the building's tenants and primary function may need to change in order to develop a viable rehabilitation and reuse plan, it is critical that funding be prioritized to stabilize, and if necessary, mothball the building to allow for a realistic planning process in which the public can participate. DNR's recently posted month-long public comment webpage for ideas regarding the future of the boathouse was well intentioned. However, its timeline was not realistic for what needs to be an engaging and thorough consultation between city and state officials, the private and non-profit sectors, and citizens to evaluate all possible reinvestment and reuse opportunities and potential partnerships that may be necessary to enable the boathouse to be rehabilitated and function economically. This may include an exploration of not only all potential public funding sources, but federal and state historic tax credits if an income-producing use for the building was identified as viable.

DNR's summary of past condition assessments and projected costs to address the building's needs is confusing and misleading. The stated price tag of \$43 Million is a "restoration" cost – a higher number than would be necessary to make critical building repairs so that the building could be functional by code. Comparing this number to a \$2 Million demolition cost presents a false narrative and may in fact be a low number. While the \$43 Million restoration estimate is attributed to a SmithGroup report from 2019, there is no citation for the demolition estimate.

In addition to these estimates, included on the DNR's page seeking public comment is a September 2022 "Phase 1 and Phase 2 Exterior Structural Conditions and Cost Assessment" report for the boathouse by MacMillan Associates and WTA Architects. This report provides phases and estimates that should be further evaluated as additional options for the building. They include:

- Cost to stabilize and mothball: \$3,596,901 (PDF Pages 42-43)
- Cost to stabilize building with restricted occupancy within the building: \$3,821,567 (PDF Pages 45-46) *For restricted occupancy, the diagrams on PDF pages 47-49 show three small rooms on the boathouse's 1st floor as well as the porch above that would need to be restricted, while the majority of the building could be usable.*
- Cost to rehabilitate entire building enclosure: \$16,181,747 (PDF Page 54).

Unfortunately, a third option of a phased plan for the building that considers mothballing, stabilization and phased rehabilitation was not presented to the public with the \$2 Million demolition or \$43 Million restoration options.

Additionally, it is undetermined if Section 106 review may be triggered by permits potentially necessary through the Army Corps of Engineers. This should be verified by Corps representatives and relayed to our office and the State Historic Preservation Office by the DNR.

The urgency of addressing the future of the boathouse is well understood, especially as it pertains to the use of ARPA funds that the DNR must obligate in the near term. Again, it is the opinion of HDAB and its staff, particularly as advisors to Detroit's City Council on such matters, that the boathouse is too important to the City of Detroit and the region for the DNR to prioritize demolition over stabilization. We urge the DNR to address the most critical stabilization needs and to pursue a public planning process to develop a reuse and rehabilitation solution to ensure the preservation of the Belle Isle Boathouse for generations to come.

Sincerely,



Calvin Jackson, Chair  
Historic Designation Advisory Board  
City of Detroit

Cc:

City Council, City of Detroit  
David Whitaker, Director, Detroit Legislative Policy Division  
Marcell Todd, Director, Detroit City Planning Commission  
Antoine Bryant, Director, Department of Planning and Development, City of Detroit  
Joe Tate, Speaker of the House, State of Michigan, 10<sup>th</sup> House District  
Ryan Schumaker, Michigan State Historic Preservation Office  
Ron Olson, Chief, Parks and Recreation Division, DNR  
Thomas Bissett, Urban Unit Manager, DNR  
Michele Hodges, Chair, Belle Isle Park Advisory Committee, DNR  
Maud Lyon, Interim President & CEO, Belle Isle Conservancy