

CITY OF DES MOINES LANDMARK REVIEW BOARD
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION
Tuesday, July 21, 2020

AGENDA ITEM #1

20-2021-4.01

Applicant: LawMark, LP (owner). The nomination was prepared by Jennifer Irsfeld James.

Location: 666 Walnut Street.

Requested Action: Nomination of the “Financial Center” as a Local Landmark.

I. GENERAL INFORMATION

The subject property is located on the southeast corner of the Walnut Street and 6th Avenue intersection in the downtown. The property also has frontage on Mulberry Street to the south. Construction of the Financial Center was completed in 1974. The building consists of a 25-story tower flanked by lower wings with underground parking in the basement.

II. APPLICABLE SECTIONS OF THE CITY CODE

Section 58-56 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance contains the landmark purpose statement. Section 58-58 contains the criteria for the designation of a landmark and Section 58-60 establishes the nomination process.

Sec. 58-56. Purpose.

It is declared as a matter of public policy that the protection, enhancement, perpetuation and use of improvements of special character or special historical or aesthetic interest or value is a public necessity and is required in the interest of health, prosperity, safety and welfare of the people. The purpose of this article is to:

- (1) Effect and accomplish the protection, enhancement and perpetuation of such improvements which represent or reflect elements of the city's cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history;
- (2) Safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic and cultural heritage, as embodied and reflected in such improvements;
- (3) Stabilize and improve property values;
- (4) Foster civic pride in the beauty and accomplishments of the past;
- (5) Protect and enhance the city's attractions to residents, tourists, and visitors and serve as a support and stimulus to business and industry;
- (6) Strengthen the economy of the city; and
- (7) Promote the use of landmarks for the education, pleasure and welfare of the people of the city.

Sec. 58-58. Designation criteria.

- (a) For purpose of this article, a landmark or landmark site designation may be placed on any site, natural or improved, including any building, improvement or structure located thereon that possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association and that:
- (1) Is significant in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture;
 - (2) Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
 - (3) Is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
 - (4) Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
 - (5) Has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.
- (b) Ordinarily cemeteries, birthplaces, or graves of historical figures; properties owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes; structures that have been moved from their original locations; reconstructed historic buildings; properties primarily commemorative in nature; and properties that have achieved significance within the past 50 years shall not be considered eligible for the landmark designation. However, such properties will qualify if they fall within the following categories:
- (1) A religious property deriving primary significance from architectural or artistic distinction or historical importance.
 - (2) A building or structure removed from its original location which is significant primarily for architectural value, or which is the surviving structure most importantly associated with a historic person or event.
 - (3) A birthplace or grave of a historical figure of outstanding importance, if there is no appropriate site or building directly associated with his or her productive life.
 - (4) A cemetery which derives its primary significance from graves of persons of transcendent importance, from age, from distinctive design features, or from association with historic events.
 - (5) A reconstructed building when accurately executed in a suitable environment and presented in a dignified manner as part of a restoration master plan, and when no other building or structure with the same association has survived.
 - (6) A property primarily commemorative in nature, if design, age, tradition or symbolic value has invested it with its own historical significance.
 - (7) A property achieving significance within the past 50 years, if it is of exceptional importance.

Sec. 58-60. Procedures.

- (a) The historic preservation commission shall consider the nomination of landmarks and landmark sites located within historic districts, and make a report and recommendation on such nomination to the city plan and zoning commission and city council as provided below. The landmark review board shall consider the nomination of landmarks and landmark sites located outside historic districts and

make a report and recommendation on such nomination to the city plan and zoning commission and city council as provided below.

- (b) Notice that an application for designation of a landmark or landmark site is being considered shall be given to the owner of the parcel on which the proposed landmark is situated or which is part of the proposed landmark site in accordance with the following:
 - (1) Such notice shall be served by certified mail, addressed to the owner at his or her last known address as such appears in the records of the county treasurer's office, or if there is no name on such records, such notice may be served by regular mail addressed to "owner" at the street address of the property in question.
 - (2) Such owner shall have the right to confer with the historic preservation commission or landmark review board, as applicable, prior to final action by the commission or board on the application.
 - (3) The historic preservation commission or landmark review board, as applicable, may, in addition, hold the public hearing of the proposed designation by giving notice as required by law.
- (c) After such investigation by the historic preservation commission or landmark review board as is deemed necessary, but in no case more than 60 days after the receipt of the complete application, the application for designation shall be recommended for approval or disapproval. Such recommendation shall be in writing and signed by the chair of the historic preservation commission or landmark review board, as applicable, and shall state the reasons for recommending approval or disapproval. The recommendation may limit itself to the proposed landmark or landmark site as described in the application or may include modifications thereof. Such recommendation shall be forwarded to and filed with the plan and zoning commission, within five days after making such recommendation.
- (d) Upon receipt of such recommendation, the plan and zoning commission shall schedule a public hearing at a specific place, date and time, not more than 30 days after such receipt, by giving notice as required by law.
- (e) Within 30 days after the public hearing, the plan and zoning commission shall forward such application to the city council, together with the recommendation of the historic preservation commission or landmark review board. The plan and zoning commission may adopt the recommendation of the historic preservation commission or landmark review board as its own or may prepare a written recommendation of its own. The plan and zoning commission may limit itself to the proposed landmark or landmark site or may include modifications thereof. If the modification requires an additional public hearing, the plan and zoning commission shall hold such hearing before forwarding the application to the city council.
- (f) Upon receipt of such recommendation, the council shall schedule a public hearing to consider the recommendation at a specific place, date and time, not more than 30 days after such receipt, by giving notice as required by law.
- (g) The city council, after public hearing, may approve, approve with modification, or disapprove the recommendation of the plan and zoning commission by a majority vote of its membership. If the plan and zoning commission shall have failed to act within the time limit set forth in this section, the city council may, nevertheless, approve, approve with modification, or disapprove the proposed landmark or landmark site as originally proposed or modified by a majority vote of its membership.

III. ANALYSIS

A nomination must demonstrate that the subject building or site possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association and meets one or more of the following criterion.

- (1) Is significant in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture;
- (2) Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;
- (3) Is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
- (4) Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- (5) Has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.

The nomination suggests the building meets Criterion 2 and 4. The following points from the submitted form make the case for how the building “is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history” and “embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction.”

- Developed as the state’s tallest skyscraper to be built in 50 years, the Financial Center is the city’s most prominent example of the Late Modern International Style of architecture. The Financial Center embodies the style’s principle tenets of asymmetrical massing, emphasis of volume, use of industrial material, and functionality over ornament, as designed and built by architect Phoenix-based Russell McCaleb, AIA, and general contractor Henry C. Beck Co., with the east wing detailed by the local firm of Lynch, Payne, Champion, Bernabe, Inc., as constructed by local contractor Weitz Co.
- The tower rises from an asymmetrical plinth consisting of two wings that are differentiated to reflect the two different financial institutions that anchored the complex. Volume is emphasized with the rhythmic verticality of tapered precast concrete and formed aluminum fins and subtle patterns in the curtain wall glass repeating on all four sides of the 25-story tower and echoing with variation on the two- and three-story plinth wings.
- Form follows function with the creamy white painted industrial concrete and aluminum mullion fins shading the recessed curtain wall of non-reflective tinted bronze insulated glazing and insulated spandrel glass; the overall effect is to reduce glare and solar gain, increasing tenant comfort and reducing air conditioning load. The creamy white and nonreflective bronze finishes, terminating at flat roofs behind broad perimeter concrete parapet walls with

recessed shadow line, contrasted with surrounding buildings and made the Financial Center a standout beyond its height.

- The Financial Center realized the ideals of a modern banking and office high rise, adding status as well as stature to the downtown skyline, while also demonstrating progress and vitality during Des Moines' 1970s post-interstate freeway era of central business district redevelopment. Notably, the Financial Center appears to be the first downtown Des Moines private office high rise to offer underground parking and incorporate fire suppression to meet a new city fire code for high rise buildings.
- The Financial Center appears to be the first private office high rise to incorporate planned accommodation for an interior skywalk route. Other key features of the Financial Center complex include a central circulation and service core with eight elevators divided into two banks for more efficient service to top floors; mechanical systems on each floor to provide tenants with variable control; additional west wing bank circulation core with two additional private elevators, rear stairs, and file conveyor system; and a flexible floor plate and concrete floor systems built to accommodate the weight of bank vaults and other specialized bank equipment. These features defined the Financial Center as the most modern skyscraper in Des Moines upon its completion, differentiating it from earlier downtown office buildings and establishing new standards for future office development that followed.
- The Financial Center is strongly associated with its major tenant, the Iowa-Des Moines National Bank, which as the premier and largest bank in Iowa at the time of construction was a leading force for downtown Des Moines economic redevelopment during the 1970s. Prior to the Financial Center's announced construction, public opinion of downtown Des Moines plummeted as businesses left for new suburban locations made readily accessible by the recently completed interstate freeway loop.
- The \$21 million Financial Center project—when announced it was the highest dollar private downtown Des Moines office construction project in the post-war era—set a new local standard for investment in the city's central business district.
- Located within the city's new downtown redevelopment zone, the Financial Center was designed as a linchpin in the nascent skywalk system, intended to invigorate the commercial business district.
- The Financial Center project was noted as the state's first joint development project coordinated by two competing financial institutions, the Iowa-Des Moines National Bank and Des Moines Savings and Loan Association; cooperation allowed for a larger unified complex dedicated to modern banking and Class A professional office space.
- The Financial Center continues to reflect the legacy of Iowa-Des Moines National Bank and Des Moines Savings and Loan Association and their vision for downtown Des Moines in the 1970s.

IV. STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Construction of the Financial Center started 48 years ago. Section 58-58(b) of the Historic Preservation Ordinance allows a building of less than 50 years of age to be designated a landmark “if it is of exceptional importance.” The Financial Center is an iconic building in the downtown and staff believes it is of exceptional importance to Des Moines. Staff recommends that the “Financial Center” property be designated as a local Landmark.

The Landmark Review Board’s recommendation will be forwarded to the Plan and Zoning Commission and the City Council for review in accordance with Section 58-60 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance. The Board and the Commission are recommending bodies in this process. The decision to designate a property or site as a local Landmark is a public policy decision made by the City Council.

If the property is designated as a Landmark then any alteration, new construction, or demolition would be subject to review by the Landmark Review Board and require approval by the City Council. The Board is a recommending body. When reviewing alterations to Landmark properties, the Board forwards a recommendation to the City Council in a similar manner as the Urban Design Review Board does when reviewing development agreements.