



City of Niagara Falls, New York
P.O. Box 69, Niagara Falls, NY 14302-0069

NIAGARA FALLS HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION

BRETT DOSTER – CHAIRMAN

KRISTIAN RUGGIERO – VICE-CHAIRMAN

PUBLIC HEARING MINUTES

THURSDAY, January 18th, 2024

6:00 PM

Council Chambers

745 Main Street, Niagara Falls, NY 14301

CALL TO ORDER & ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order at 6:05 p.m.

BOARD MEMBERS PRESENT:

Brett Doster, Chairman
Kristian Ruggiero, Vice-Chairman
Jessica Berry
Jessica Collins
Noah Munoz
Georgia Robinson-Bradberry
Andrea Fortin-Nossavage

STAFF PRESENT:

Kevin Forma, Director of Planning
Mike Pesarchick, Planner II/HPS

SPEAKERS PRESENT:

Gerald Škrilin	Brandon Kennedy
Saladin Allah	JP Sharpe
Linda Grace-Kobas	Emily Jarnot
Bernice Radel	Carl Skompinski
Kobe Rickund	Jordan Smith
Connor Ground	Helen Kress
Michaela Doreen	Jasiah Jackson
Addison Moore	Cherrish Beals
Emma Santos	Ryan Altieri
Jessica Forgette	Claire Ciello

Belinda Patterson
Peter [Last Name not Given]
Alaura Restaino
Donta Myles

The Pledge of Allegiance was recited.

INTRODUCTION

Mr. Doster gave an introduction to those in attendance outlining rules of decorum for the hearing. He asked speakers to address the Commission as a whole instead of addressing individual members. Mr. Doster said that the Commission would not respond to questions or statements presented except to “preserve decorum” and asked that participants use “decorum expected for speaking before a government deliberative assembly.” Speakers were allowed five minutes each.

Mr. Doster explained the steps left in the Historic Landmarking process. The Commission sought public input on the proposed Landmark Designation for The Turtle. He said that, if it pleased the Commission, a recommendation for Landmark Designation, letters of support, and the public comments received at the hearing would be forwarded to the City Council for a final landmarking vote after the next Commission meeting. The City Council would vote at its next scheduled meeting if the recommendation would be accepted.

Mr. Doster asked Mr. Pesarchick if Letters of Support were received. Mr. Pesarchick said the Office of Planning had received 512 letters from the public and six letters from organizations.

Mr. Doster asked if there was a sense of for or opposed. **Mr. Pesarchick** said all letters were in support of the Landmark designation.

Mr. Doster asked which organizations sent letters. **Mr. Pesarchick** said letters were received from the University at Buffalo Department of Indigenous Studies, The Seneca Nation Tribal Historic Preservation Office, the Niagara Falls Heritage Area, Docomomo, the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center, and the Preservation League of New York State.

Mr. Doster said that due to the large volume of letters received, the Commission would not read off the name of each individual who sent a letter but they would be part of the public record.

Mr. Pesarchick said that the Office of Planning had also received letters opposing the Landmarking designation, one from a private citizen and one from Niagara Falls Redevelopment, LLC, the property owner. He said both letters would be available as part of the record.

PUBLIC HEARING

1. Proposed Historic Landmark designation for 25 Rainbow Boulevard (former Native American Center for the Living Arts, A.K.A. “The Turtle”)

A motion to open the public hearing was made by **Mr. Doster** and seconded by **Mr. Ruggiero**.

MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

The public hearing was opened at 6:09 p.m.

Gerald Škrlin spoke. He stated that he was a resident of Niagara Falls who lived in the historic Lavinia Porter House. He said he was in favor of having the Turtle recognized historically. He said that it would deny rights to Niagara Falls Redevelopment, but he knew about that because he himself was denied rights to renovate the exterior of his house. **Mr. Škrlin** said that he was all for protecting the Turtle. He said there were eight storage containers all around his house on private property next door owned by Mirani Miranda holdings. He said if you couldn't protect his house, how could you protect the Turtle? **Mr. Škrlin** asked how they could convince Howard Milstein or Roger Trevino to agree, because he believed they were going to "fight this one out to the end." He wished the Commission good luck and asked for help with his house.

Saladin Allah spoke. He stated that he was in favor of making the Turtle a historic landmark and said he was a representative of Niagara Falls Heritage Area, which preserves and promotes natural, historic and cultural resources from Niagara Falls to Old Fort Niagara. He said that Niagara Falls Heritage Area had several successful projects, especially the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Heritage Center.

Mr. Allah said that the Heritage Center was one of the Seven Sites to save and that it took a decade for community leaders to come together and save it. He said that people often say The Turtle is "too old" and has been sitting for 20 years, but the Heritage Center was built in 1863 and you could visit it tomorrow.

Mr. Allah said his other point was that The Turtle was not just part of Niagara Falls' cultural heritage, it was part of their cultural heritage tourism. He said there's nowhere in the world to see The Turtle. People will come to see it. He said The Turtle had an inherent value to it that cannot be replaced with a hotel. He said it was important that they preserve cultural heritage and understand that they create cultural heritage tourism landmarks.

Mr. Allah said that other places in the country highlight the assets they have where people go to see people who were born there. He noted the Polly King gallery that Niagara Falls Heritage Area recently opened. **Mr. Allah** said that they usually don't hear the administration acknowledge that people "drive by Niagara Falls and act like we didn't just do that." He said people around the world will come from around the world and say "that's beautiful" and said they needed to do the same with the Turtle.

Mr. Allah closed by asking if any of the Commission members were indigenous and said there should be an indigenous person on the board.

Mr. Doster asked audience members to refrain from applause in the interest of the record.

Linda Grace-Kobus introduced herself as a resident of Amherst, originally born in Niagara Falls, and said she supported a Landmark designation for the Turtle. She said that the Turtle was the first “significant and positive recognition of the indigenous people in the area.” She said that they had to consider the organizational structure of the Turtle and the building itself. She said that it didn’t close in a vacuum; it closed as Niagara Falls was hit hard by the recession of the late 1980s and that there were political tensions with Native Americans that erased earlier good feelings. She said no cultural center could withstand that.

Ms. Grace-Kobus said she believed there was enough community interest to create a steering committee to create a “peaceful friend for the people” She stated the Turtle “transcends its architecture” and “speaks deeply about origins, beliefs, and values.” She asked the Commission to send a supporting resolution to City Council. She said that even if City Council approved it, the building would still be in a “precarious” state. **Mr. Pesarchick** and **Mr. Doster** said **Ms. Grace-Kobus’** five minutes had expired and she concluded her time.

Bernice Radel spoke as the new Executive Director at Preservation Buffalo Niagara. She said she wanted to present a petition of support with “just shy” of 1,200 signatures. She said this was the most signatures ever received on a Preservation Buffalo Niagara petition.

Ms. Radel also stated that PBN made a map of where signatures came from, and they were from all over the country. She said “it went viral because truly, people love this building and what it means for the community, what they’ve learned inside of this building, and they cherish this very important, cool little building in downtown Niagara Falls.”

Ms. Radel said that PBN had recently hired a Niagara Falls liaison and that the new strategic plan emphasized Niagara Falls in addition to the East Side of Buffalo. She said she grew up in Niagara Falls and had many memories of hanging out at the Turtle. She said the Turtle was an “opportunity to celebrate what was and celebrate what is” and to make the Turtle a great cultural building. She said PBN welcomed collaboration with the community.

Kobe Rickund introduced himself as a member of the Tuscarora Nation and the Turtle Clan. He said the destruction of the Turtle, a successful and significant site for many Native communities, would “further perpetuate the historical pattern of cultural genocide.” He said that the Turtle “serves as a cultural connection for natives in the City of Niagara Falls and natives in the surrounding reservations.” He said that they had the chance to bring a “beacon of hope, culture, tradition and history” back if efforts were made for the Landmark designation.

Connor Ground introduced himself as a student at Niagara Falls High School and member of the Mohawk tribe of the Bear Clan. He said he believed in preserving the Turtle because it was an indigenous landmark. He said that not too long ago, native people were not allowed to dance and sing. He said that the genocide of native culture in Canada and America was still felt today in his generation. Mr. Ground said that by allowing the destruction of the Turtle, they would still be losing Native American culture.

Michaela Doreen said she is a member of the Mohawk Tribe. Michaela said that the Turtle held a lot of memories that people can't get back. She stated that it was disheartening and devastating to allow it to sit there. It is another thing that wipes out the contributions of her people. She said that getting it back would give purpose to Native Americans and provide an opportunity for people to learn about the native culture. She stated that a new generation of natives would enjoy having somewhere like this to see themselves including herself. Michaela stated that she thinks the Turtle would benefit the City of Niagara Falls and help the diversity of people grow.

Addison Moore stated that she believes the Turtle can be such a welcoming and inviting building that touches on the culture of Native Americans that we often forget about. She said that the Turtle would provide the channel to teach future generations the culture of Native Americans. Addison stated that the Turtle would allow future generations to learn more about a diverse and beautiful community

Emma Santos introduced herself and stated the Turtle is very significant to the native culture in Niagara Falls and surrounding areas. She said that it is a beautiful building that has so much potential and it's the only building that represents Native American in this area. She stated that the Turtle is a place where Native Americans can go to feel connected to their ancestors and their heritage. She stated that this [not designating the Turtle as a historical landmark] would be just another example of a non-native person silencing Native Americans.

Ms. Santos shared her own personal experience that led to her not learning from family about her culture. The Turtle would give people a chance to learn more about the culture and connect to the culture.

Jessica Forgette introduced herself and stated that after college she made a conscious effort to move back to this area to help improve this community. One thing she remembered the most from her childhood in Niagara Falls was attending events at the Turtle in the early 90s.

Ms. Forgette and her cousins would walk around eating food and looking at artwork made by people who looked like her. They would listen to the elders speak about the good days and so much more. She stated that she grew up not knowing where she really belonged in the city, the Turtle made a connection that she needed. Ms. Forgette stated that it has been decades since the Niagara Falls Redevelopment purchased the Turtle and 140 acres of property in Niagara Falls. They've chosen to neglect almost all of it including the Turtle. She said that watching it become the shell of what it once was has

been very heartbreaking. As an Educator at Niagara Falls High School, she sees so many Native students like the ones that came with her to the meeting feel that loneliness, invisibility and disconnection to their ancestors and native community. She started the Native American youth club at the high school in the hopes of getting not only Native students, but all students more involved and educated on the rich native culture that is originally from this area.

Ms. Forgette stated that having the Turtle become a landmark designation and one day brought back to its glory would be such a powerful story to have the students tell their own children one day, we as a city have to do better. She asked the HPC to let the future generations honor and value all cultures and be proud of the City of Niagara Falls chose to stand for something.

Brandon Kennedy introduced himself and stated that he was with Preservation Buffalo Niagara. He is a preservationist and a historian but came as a voice for a symbol of our region's heritage, a testament to our collective past, and the future. Mr. Kennedy provide a brief history of the Turtle and the architect.

Mr. Kennedy stated that the architect was inspired by the Shawnee creation story, the Turtle, and he envisioned a structure that would celebrate their diversity and heritage. The architect designs are noted for incorporating symbolic forms and reflecting elements from the local indigenous nations who would utilize them. The Turtle is not just a building, but a symbol of the rich cultural tapestry that makes up our nation and our region. It is its design is a testament to the creativity and the ingenuity of indigenous architects, and it is a rare gem of the architectural landscape of our country. The Turtle stands a rare example of zoomorphic architecture in the United States, and it's one of the few remaining examples of indigenous architecture in Western New York. It is perhaps a one of a kind structure. In all the research we conducted, they were only able to find one other building that resembles the Turtle. He stated that today the Turtle stands vacant and deteriorating, its grandeur and beauty is fading and it faces the threat of demolition. This will be a loss not just for our city, but for our history and for indigenous populations. He stated that the Turtle has the untapped potential, as a spacious auditorium exhibit space, and a restaurant area that will promise or adaptive reuse.

Mr. Kennedy stated that designating this as a local landmark, would not only recognize the historic cultural and architectural significance of the Turtle but would also ensure that any future changes aligned with its original character. This designation would enhance Niagara Falls cultural diversity, promote tourism, and protect a building that is truly one of a kind. We will be preserving an irreplaceable asset for future generations. He urged the HPC to vote in favor of the local landmark designation for the Turtle.

JP Sharpe introduced himself and shared memories of visiting local landmarks with his family, including the Turtle. He stated that so much of the history of Niagara Falls is gone and the need for the city to preserve what is left.

Emily Jarnot introduced herself as a preservation planner with Preservation Buffalo Niagara and a resident of Niagara Falls. She reminded the HPC that Niagara Falls have lost so many historical structures and items due to negligence and urban renewal. She stated that she did not want the Turtle to face the same fate.

Ms. Jarnot stated that the Turtle is symbolic of the earth and the skylight eagle on his back symbolizes protection. It shows that the earth is protected. She asked what kind of message it would send not only to the people who believe in that symbolism, but to the green urban renewal plans. She said that it is a natural feature that makes Niagara Falls one of the best tourism destinations in the world. Losing the Turtle would symbolize that the earth is indeed in danger.

Ms. Jarnot stated that we have a real chance to change the common theme of abandonment, demolition and parking lot because if the developer wants to build another hotel, she would suggest looking right down the street at Hotel Niagara which is actually in need of development. She will serve as a liaison with Preservation Buffalo Niagara, and I would really love to hit the ground running together and start with one of the most iconic buildings of Niagara Falls. She asked the HPC to vote yes, to saving the Turtle for future generations.

Carl Skompinski introduced himself and thanked the Niagara Falls Preservation Commission for the opportunity to speak on behalf of the Native American Center for the Living Arts Landmark application. He stated that the fact that the application was created in the first place demonstrates the value of the city and the Commission Board for the Turtle building. The critical point is to highlight the need to landmark the Turtle is Niagara Falls loss of some significant buildings in the past that have another negatively impact it's very fabric and economy. He used the Winter Garden, the Brick Carriage Building and the Historic Preservation Office as examples.

Mr. Skompinski stated the city's comprehensive plan from 2000 in 2009, states the desire to develop a cultural district. Niagara Falls needs more year round with destinations and not another hotel. At the intersection of the entertainment district and state park where 9 million people visit each year, Niagara Falls has a regional asset that needs to be put back into productive use for the city's economic benefit. The Turtle can have second life as part of the cultural ecosystem promoted with the Aquarium, the Niagara Falls Underground Railroad Center, and other city assets along the river.

Mr. Skompinski said now is the time to focus on what can be possible with passing the local landmark application for the Turtle. It can be a first step in correcting what one person wrote in the night, isn't it? He stated that his understanding from news reports and talking to the owners that the building is not in bad shape. It needs repairs and updates. The mechanicals of the building need to be updated to modernize the building and to make it more sustainable.

Jordan Smith stated that he was a Mohawk and resides on the Tuscarora Indian Reservation with his beautiful family. He stated that he comes from three generations of singers, dancers, and traditional Educator of the Shawnee culture. He is currently

employed as the Advocate of Interpretation and Programming at the Old Fort Niagara Association. He stated that when the Turtle was built it was way ahead of its time. He stated that having native architecture, a native designer, still to this day as the numbers show us that does not happen often. It's significant not only to the Shawnee Nation and the many people throughout Lake Ontario area, but it's significant to the indigenous people throughout the world. Mr. Smith stated that the Turtle gave a place as a kid to get a start to become the man he is today, the father he is today and the community leader that he is today. The Turtle provided many opportunities for not just indigenous people but for all people in society. He explained that it could be "reawaken". Mr. Smith said the more you learn about me, the less you are inclined to make an ignorant assumption. Knowledge is power and that's what we need to do. That is what the building was intended for and he thinks it can be utilized in that way.

Helen Kress, 2965 Western Avenue shared a letter that she wrote. She stated that the Milstein's and [Niagara Falls Redevelopment, LLC] purchased the Turtle in 1997 when it was already vacant 27 years later, five Mayors later, and many City Councils later, they're still not doing anything with it. She stated that groups like Preservation Buffalo Niagara suggests the government and the community should work with the owner but no one can work with them. He's done nothing in 27 years.

Ms. Kress stated that the Turtle in this century, has added no economic value to tourism or the community. She said unless you combine preservation status, with some real ideas in business connections, I don't think it should go forward.

Jasiah Jackson stated that she grew up in post urban renewal in Niagara Falls. She said that for those sitting in the room, we should be in support of a we should stand on the right side of history for preserving this type of building and cultural heritage representing indigenous history. Ms. Jackson stated that she works at the Underground Railroad Heritage Center, as the Youth Advocacy Specialist mayor. She stated that working there you cannot talk about the black struggle without talking about the indigenous struggle. They are intertwined and cannot be ignored. She stated that she could not sit there and be silent about the importance of preserving the Turtle. Too often throughout history of our railroad, throughout slavery many people of African descent, were stripped of their identities.

They had to preserve the little culture that they had left in order to empower the next generation. Ms. Jackson stated it's time to do something right now to encourage the HPC to support this and the young people there that can speak up for themselves and can speak up for the preservation of their culture.

Cherrish Beals, 740 Park Place, shared an article from December 5, 1962. The article speaks the organization of 22 business men that came together to save the historic Adams Power Plant. The plant was not saved because of Robert Moses. **Ms. Beals** stated that we can repeat the past or think about what we learned yesterday, what we want tomorrow and what we want for the future.

Ryan Altieri stated that receipt of the letter from NFR Turtle, LLC, was confirmed so he did not need to speak.

Claire Cielo introduced herself and stated that she was a resident of the Tuscarora Nation. Her children are descendants of Duffy Wilson. She stated that there's more to be said and more to be explored for that space because of the size of the Turtle. There's no place in this area that has a building big enough to hold a lot of our family events and everything else. She emphasized that there's also economical uses for this building, not just for Historical and Museum purposes.

Belinda Patterson from the Tuscarora Nation introduced herself as former head of Native interpretation at Old Fort Niagara. She stated worked there for five years and created quite a network between the indigenous community and people in education. She stated that she worked with tons of tourist at Fort Niagara giving them their first impression of them as indigenous people. The need and desire for more of an indigenous experience was so vast. People came in looking and asking where they can get more of indigenous experience. There is nowhere to send them. Not only is there not very many places that our communities can go there isn't really anywhere locally to send tourists to get an indigenous experience. Ms. Patterson told the HPC not to ask if the ideas aren't there, because they're all there. They are waiting to share their ideas on ways to use the Turtle.

Peter [last name not given] introduced himself in his native language. He stated that he was Mohawk and Tuscarora. He said as a nation, he had the honor and privilege to grow up there his whole life. He also had the honor and privilege to be inside of the Turtle; hear many great songs and beautiful music, people singing and dancing. He stated that the Chairman and Chair people, have the opportunity to take the beautiful words that all the people brought to them and to do something with it, to do something with all those beautiful words. He stated that they had the opportunity to bring back life to the city. He urged them to do something.

A Laura Restaino stated that she wanted to add her support to designating the Turtle as historical landmark. She suggested that a fund be created to purchase the property from the owner. Ms. Restaino stated that she wanted to highlight achievements of other local organizations in the area s like, the Underground Railroad Center and The Western New York Land Conservancy, which has done amazing work in Niagara Falls and around Western New York. She stated that these people have the ideas; they have purchased properties and really rehabilitated buildings.

City Councilman Donta Myles stated that he was digesting everything he heard during the meeting. He said he was not a frequent visitor to the Turtle but related it to the Community Center he did frequent as a child. Mr. Myles stated that personally he is for preservation. He asked that everyone come together to come up with a solid plan for the Turtle. He stated that he just doesn't want to preserve a building and nothing happens. He stated that if it is preserved, the community come together with a plan to make this beautiful building vibrant again.

A motion to close the public hearing was made by **Mr. Doster** and seconded by **Mr. Munoz**.

MOTION PASSED UNANIMOUSLY.

The public hearing was closed at 7:25 p.m.

ADJOURNMENT