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Kasson school recommended for National Register

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KASSON -- The city's old elementary school is one step closer to being put on the National Register of Historic Places. The Minnesota Historical Society's State Review Board voted unanimously Tuesday night to recommend the school be put on the National Register. The nomination now heads to Washington, D.C. for final approval from the Keeper of the National Register at the National Park Service.

Members of the Kasson Alliance for Restoration or KARE were quick to celebrate the board's decision. "We're obviously excited about the decision by the board, but at the same time cautiously optimistic. This doesn't save the school. We still need to find an economically viable adaptive reuse for the school," said Kenton Spading, KARE's chief research officer. He said KARE has been approached by at least four developers interested in renovating the school. Options include turning it into a community center, art center or housing.

City Administrator Randy Lenth said city officials were not surprised by the board's decision. "We were told that this was going to be a rubber stamp, so we didn't exactly have a whole lot of inclination that this was going to be objected to," Lenth said.

City officials spoke against the school's nomination Tuesday night. The city's attorney, Shelley Ryan, also asked the board to delay a decision on the nomination because it could affect an upcoming court case.

KARE won a temporary injunction in June against the city to prevent the school's demolition. A hearing is scheduled for February in Dodge District Court.

City leaders began moving toward demolition after voters in November rejected a \$3.9 million proposal to renovate the school into a government center and library. Lenth said renovating the 32,000-square-foot school would likely cost taxpayers millions more than building a new, smaller library on the site.

Susan Roth, deputy state historic preservation officer, said she plans to make sending the school's nomination to the federal government her chief priority. She said a federal decision should be made within 45 days once the nomination is received. If the school is put on the National Register, it would be more than just an honor, Spading said.

He added, "That (designation) opens up a number of investment options that we didn't have before for federal tax credits and grants."