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Fate of old Kasson elementary school undecided

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MANTORVILLE -- The fate of Kasson's old elementary school building now rests with a judge.

District Judge Casey Christian said Tuesday he will try to decide by June 18 whether to grant the Kasson Alliance for Restoration's request for a temporary injunction against the city of Kasson to prevent the demolition of the old school building.

A dozen alliance members looked on in the Dodge County courtroom as attorneys for the nonprofit argued that the 89-year-old elementary school is a historical resource that deserves protection under the Minnesota Environmental Rights Act.

"It is a form of lobotomizing a community's history when you tear down these beautiful buildings," said KARE's attorney Mark Anfinson.

But the city's attorney, George Hoff, argued that a historical expert hired by the city found the building had no historical significance and that Kasson voters in November rejected a \$3.9 million proposal to renovate the school into a library and city government complex.

"The City Council has gone out of their way to attempt to find a reuse for this property and have done a thorough environmental review," Hoff said.

After listening to the attorneys arguments, the judge said he finds the case to be unusual.

"I think this is somewhat of an extreme case given the lengths the city has gone to already," Christian said. "Have not the citizens of Kasson already spoke here?"

The legal arguments hinged on whether or not the school could be considered historic. KARE attorneys cited two Minnesota historical experts who said the building would most likely qualify for the National Registry of Historic Places. They also noted that Minnesota Preservation Alliance included the school on its list of the Ten Most Endangered Historic Properties.

Meanwhile, Hoff said the city hired historian consultant Robert Vogel of Pathfinder CRM who concluded the school lacks architectural distinction and would not meet the standards for the National Register of Historic Places.

The city's attorney also argued that delaying the building's demolition could end up costing the city financially. Bids for the building's demolition expire on June 21, and he said it is reasonable to assume that if the city has to seek bids a second time it could end up costing \$95,000 more. Add to that the rising interest rates on 20-year-bonds for the \$4 million needed to build a new building on the site, and the city could end up paying an additional \$450,000 over the 20 years.

Based on these financial concerns, Hoff asked the judge to require KARE to post a \$636,959 bond to cover the potential city losses.

"This has gone through a long process. There is no reason to prolong it," Hoff said.

But the nonprofit's attorneys argued that it would be unfair to ask the group to post a hefty bond when the law is aimed at helping citizens preserve historic sites. Anfinson emphasized that the group is not trying to permanently prevent the building's demolition. The organization just wants a chance to determine the building's historical significance before it is destroyed.

He added, "If there isn't that opportunity, this (building) is lost forever."



