

Former Kasson school makes endangered list

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By Heather J. Carlson

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KASSON -- With a wrecking ball looming in its future, the city's former elementary school has been named one of the state's top 10 most endangered historic places.

The designation comes a few weeks before the Kasson City Council is expected to vote on demolishing the 90-year-old building with hopes of building a new library on the site. The council is expected to consider the issue May 23.

The Preservation Alliance of Minnesota announced its top 10 list on Thursday, which included five other historic schools throughout Minnesota. As school districts build new facilities, more of these abandoned, historic buildings are facing the threat of demolition, said Bonnie McDonald, the nonprofit's executive director.

"We believe that the historic schools are the community center -- especially for our rural communities and regional centers. It is the place that brought together the entire community, perhaps unlike any other structure in that particular city or town," McDonald said.

In the case of the former Kasson elementary school, research has shown that the building may be the first project designed by Minnesota architect Nels S. Jacobson Jr., McDonald said.

"We feel (the school) is very significant because (Jacobson) went on to do some very important work around the state," she said. "We feel it's important to preserve the Jacobson architectural legacy here."

Members of the Kasson Alliance for Restoration, or KARE, nominated the former school for the endangered list. KARE's Vice President Spencer Stevens said the group "was ecstatic" over news of the building being selected, but added "that doesn't save the building."

The 300-member group is now stepping up its rescue efforts. It has threatened to file an injunction in court against the city to prevent the school demolition. It has also filed a request for an environmental review of the proposed demolition with the state's Environmental Quality Board and is working to get the building on the National Registry of Historic Places.

"We're going full-steam ahead, and we're going to save the building," Stevens said.

KARE has raised \$15,000 to save the building and is working with investors interested in renovating the school. There are several proposals being worked on, including converting the school into condos or a retail center, said KARE President Diane O'Brien-Berge.

Kasson Mayor Tim Tjosaas said the council plans to move forward with demolishing the building based on the voters' wishes. Last November, voters rejected a \$3.9 million proposal to renovate the former school into a library, city hall or other government use. He added that the city will not consider selling the building unless the KARE group presents a detailed plan soon that wins council approval.

"That's what we've asked for (from KARE)," he said. "Give us a financing plan. Show us a development plan and we would go from there with the understanding that it would benefit the community."



A stairway in the former Kasson Elementary School, which has been named one of Minnesota's top 10 most endangered historic places.



A hallway in the former Kasson Elementary School, which has been named one of Minnesota's top 10 most endangered historic places.
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