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Long List of Concerns for Washington State Preservationists An interview with Washington Trust for Historic Preservation's Jennifer Meisner

Article and Photo By Todd Matthews, Editor

For 16 years, the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation has released an annual list identifying the most endangered historic properties in Washington State.

On Tuesday, organization representatives were in Tacoma to announce this year's list, which is comprised of eight properties and includes Tacoma's 95-year-old Murray Morgan Bridge. It's not the first time Washington Trust has tagged a Tacoma structure as endangered. In 1992, the Pacific National Bank Building (known locally as the "Luzon Building") and the Japanese Language School received the designation (the former was recently purchased by a local developer who plans to convert it into commercial office space; the latter was demolished in 2004). In 2003, the Elk's Temple received the designation; after years of on-again-off-again development rumors, the building is currently for sale. And First United Methodist Church received the label in 2006 (it was demolished the following year).

Indeed, the 'endangered' designation doesn't necessarily mean the heritage property will be saved. A review of Washington Trust's lists over the past 16 years (available online at wa-trust.org/mostendangered/past_lists.htm) indicates 98 buildings have received the designation -- 35 have been saved or are in the process of being saved; 22 have been demolished; and 21 have moved from the endangered list to an ongoing "watch list."

"We can't save every building," admits Washington Trust field director Chris Moore. "But there's a secondary outcome [of the listing]. At times, because a building is a well-loved community icon, it can be a catalyst for the community to engage in a campaign that will work to protect other buildings in the future."

In addition to the Murray Morgan Bridge, the following heritage properties were included on this year's list:

- Historic Commercial Fishing Net Sheds (Gig Harbor)
- Washington Hall (Seattle)
- Kapus Farmstead (Ridgefield, Clark County)
- Nuclear Reactor Building (Seattle)
- Bettinger House (Edmonds)
- Greyhound Bus Station (Olympia)
- Old Granary Building (Bellingham)

On Tuesday, the *Index* spoke with Washington Trust executive director Jennifer Meisner (pictured) to discuss the organization's annual endangered list.

TACOMA DAILY INDEX: How successful has Washington Trust been in protecting those buildings added to its annual list of endangered historic properties?

JENNIFER MEISNER: It really varies. We do our list annually and then really focus our resources and energy -- and mobilize our board members



located around the state -- to really focus on those properties. Recently, we've had a couple great successes. Last year, we had Seventh Church of Christ Scientist in Seattle on our list, and it was saved. First United Methodist Church in downtown Seattle was a listing years and years ago, and we recently had success with that one. Once the year is over, we don't just stop working on them. If there hasn't been a positive outcome by the end of the year, we put the properties on a watch list and continue to work on advocacy. It's really a way for us to focus our resources and energy on buildings that have been identified as the most threatened throughout the state.

INDEX: Some of the properties, such as the Greyhound bus station in Olympia, are on historic registers, but still endangered. How does that work?

MEISNER: The bus depot in Olympia is a contributing building within a national historic district. But that doesn't mean it has local protection. Not all national register districts are also local districts. It's at the local level that protection comes in. Even though it's a contributing building and designated as historically significant, there's really nothing in place to protect it from being demolished other than it might trigger state environmental review. But there isn't a demolition ordinance in place that would protect it. But, yes, some of them have already been identified as historic, but there may not be the protection in place to make sure they don't get demolished. A lot of times properties are listed on the national register, but there's no local protection.

INDEX: What's the impetus then for putting a heritage property on the national register?

MEISNER: It's honorific. There's a notoriety as-

sociated with being designated at that level. But if a government entity were to come in and make a change to the building, demolish it, or make a significant change that would impact the integrity of it, it kicks in a whole other review process. It's kind of a federal level review that basically says that if a government agency is going to affect a change, they would have to provide some kind of mitigation. Something we always try to focus our attention on is getting more local districts created and really support communities that try to do that. Preservation really does happen at the local level. Also, along with protections that come with regulations and ordinances, we really want to promote more incentives for preservation. Make it comfortable for a developer or owner of a particular property to put together a project that is feasible through things like federal, local, and state tax valuation programs. There aren't a lot of grants out there available for historic properties. We're really trying to promote programs that help a developer see the project and get it done.

INDEX: Looking at the different properties on this year's list, 'endangered' could mean a number of different things. Can you clarify what Washington Trust means by 'endangered'?

MEISNER: Yes. It could be what we sometimes call 'demolition by neglect.' A property that has been vacant for many years. Maybe its owner really hasn't had the resources to keep up the maintenance on it. A lot of times it's a demolition. That's usually when the red flags go up -- if there's a threat of demolition. That's really what we see a lot, especially in urban environments. But you also see it out in rural areas, too.

INDEX: Since the list was started in 1992, have you seen the same types of buildings classified as endangered? Has it been more commercial buildings some years, and residential buildings other years?

MEISNER: In the last few years, I know we've seen a rise in religious properties. With religious properties, there's a whole separation of church and state, so those buildings often times are not protected. There has been a lot of pressure on religious properties -- the makeup of congregations are changing, they don't need a facility the size they had, and they don't have the income to maintain the buildings. Or there's development pressure and an enticement to sell their property and move on to a smaller location. It's all understandable. Also, there's development pressure in urban centers. You see more threats to smaller commercial buildings. We also have seen a rise in rural properties. Last year, we were able to get a bill passed through the Legislature to create the heritage barn program and we have a small grant program now.