

DECISION/DIRECTION NOTE

Title: 265 LeMarchant Road, Heritage Designation

Date Prepared: November 23, 2021

Report To: Committee of the Whole

Councillor and Role: Councillor Maggie Burton, Heritage

Ward: Ward 2

Decision/Direction Required:

To seek approval to designate 265 LeMarchant Road (former West End Fire Station) as a Heritage Building.

Discussion – Background and Current Status:

In October 2020, the City issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the sale and development of the former West End Fire Hall at 265 LeMarchant Road (replaced several years ago by a new fire station at 215 Blackmarsh Road). Council's aim was to preserve the old building while encouraging new development and use for the vacant property. The RFP offered additional rating points for any applicant intending to designate the building as a Heritage Building.

The subject property is located within Heritage Area 3, is designated Institutional under the Envision St. John's Municipal Plan and is zoned Institutional Downtown (INST-DT). The property is owned by the City, however the potential purchaser wishes to seek heritage designation and therefore the City is initiating that process. Should Council designate the building, Heritage Use is discretionary in the INST-DT Zone. A Heritage Use would allow the building to be used for any use which, in Council's opinion, is compatible with the adjoining uses. The former Grace Hospital site is located behind the building, with a mix of residential, office, clinic and retail uses adjacent and opposite the site.

Once the sale is finalized and if the new owner applies to develop the site, the development application will be brought to the Built Heritage Experts Panel (BHEP) for review and recommendation to Council. There is no development application at this time.

In 2001, the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (Heritage NL) prepared a Building Preservation Brief on the Central Fire Station and other St. John's fire halls (attached). This provides background information on how, following the Great Fire of 1892, St. John's was divided into three districts, each with its own fire station. The original West End Fire Station was located on New Gower Street, at the intersection with Bambrick's Street, close to the Horwood Lumber Company lot off Springdale Street (now the Fortis building). Due to deterioration of the wooden fire hall and the growth of the Cornwall Avenue area, it was recommended to build a new West End Fire Hall on LeMarchant Road to serve the rapidly increasing population there.

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The “new” West End Fire Station was built between 1942 and 1944 by the firm of William D. McCarter, architect, with assistance of draughtsman Frederick Colbourne. As Robert Mellin notes in his book *Newfoundland Modern*, this was a time immediately before Confederation when modern designs and Art Deco architecture was emerging in Newfoundland, in part due to the influence of US troops in St. John’s and American pop culture. The Second World War directly influenced the design of the station because of the limited supply of building materials due to wartime rationing. The building was originally designed to be constructed of steel, but due to the uncertain availability of steel, it was changed to reinforced concrete. While construction began in 1942, it had to stop in November 1942 until the end of 1943 when steel-reinforcing bars (rebar) became available. Firefighting operations shifted to the LeMarchant Road location in 1945, and the old station was demolished in June 1946.

The fire hall is a two-storey structure with a three-bay garage and a basement. The façade is simple, with a slightly recessed row of upper windows and large, rounded columns that separate the garage bays. Originally there were three rounded columns, but one was removed in 1973 to accommodate two new garage doors. The main entrance originally had glass block, a common modernist material, in the transom and side lights, which has since been removed. The original signage (“West Fire Station”) of individual steel letters projecting from the building was typical of modern architecture.

An interesting fact is that the building was designed with stables in the basement and an outdoor manure pit (still on the east side of the building). In the 1940s, the government only had a single diesel snowplow, and this was not considered reliable to provide access to a fire site in heavy snow, and therefore horses and stables were still required.

The building has been renovated over time but much of its original design remains. Should the building be designated, the applicant would be encouraged to restore original features, such as glass block and original style of signage, or incorporate other modern elements into the design.

The West End Fire Hall is significant because it was the first of a cluster of modern buildings along LeMarchant Road designed by McCarter and Colbourne, such as the American Aerated Water Company Building at 278 LeMarchant Road (now provincially owned) and the Cornwall Theatre at 264 LeMarchant Road (now Smith Stockley). These buildings create an enclave of modern architecture which should be preserved. Additional information about this area is found in Heritage NL’s “LeMarchant Road: An Enclave of Mid-Century Modernist Structures in St. John’s, NL” (attached).

The West End Fire Station is a good surviving example of modern architecture and scores an 86 on the Heritage Designation Criteria. A draft State of Significance is attached, should Council decide to designate it.

In 2017, the BHEP reviewed a list of modern buildings in St. John’s that merit designation and the West End Fire Station was on it. As per the City of St. John’s Act, the City will continue work toward preserving heritage buildings, structures, lands or areas that collectively represent a cross-section of periods and styles in the city’s historical and cultural evolution.

Key Considerations/Implications:

1. Budget/Financial Implications: Not applicable.
2. Partners or Other Stakeholders: Future property owner; heritage organizations.
3. Alignment with Strategic Directions/Adopted Plans:
St. John's Strategic Plan 2019-2029 - A Sustainable City – Plan for land use and preserve and enhance the natural and built environment where we live.
4. Legal or Policy Implications: Should the designation proceed, the Council will direct the Legal Department to amend the Heritage By-Law to include 265 LeMarchant Road as a Heritage Building.
5. Privacy Implications: Not applicable.
6. Engagement and Communications Considerations: Prior to designating the building, Council must issue a Notice of Motion at a regular Council meeting.
7. Human Resource Implications: Not applicable.
8. Procurement Implications: Not applicable.
9. Information Technology Implications: Not applicable.
10. Other Implications: Not applicable.

Recommendation:

That Council approve the heritage designation of 265 LeMarchant Road and direct the Legal Department to amend Schedule C (Heritage Buildings) of the Heritage By-Law for Council's consideration.

Prepared by: Ann-Marie Cashin, MCIP, Planner III – Urban Design & Heritage

Approved by: Ken O'Brien, MCIP, Chief Municipal Planner