

SUBJECT: A report and recommendation on a proposed Local Historic Landmark designation of The Mercantile Library Building at 414 Walnut Street in the Central Business District.

GENERAL INFORMATION:

Location: 414 Walnut Street, Cincinnati, Ohio 45202
Petitioners: City Studios
Petitioner's Address: 1148 Main Street, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45202
Property Owner: MCA Center, LLC
Property Owner's Address: 120 E. 4th Street, Cincinnati, Ohio, 45202

ATTACHMENTS:

Attachment A- Location Map
Attachment B- Historic Designation Report
Attachment C- Historic Conservation Guidelines

BACKGROUND:

The petitioner is requesting a Local Historic Landmark designation for the Mercantile Library Building at 414 Walnut Street in the Central Business District. The building is owned by MCA Center, LLC and is currently office space and the Mercantile Library takes up two levels of the building. This designation will make the building potentially eligible for historic tax credits to renovate and convert the building to residential space. The two levels of the Mercantile Library will remain.

According to Chapter 1435-07-1 of the Cincinnati Municipal Code (Historic Preservation), certain findings must be made before a Local Historic Landmark can be designated by City Council. The proposed building must be found to have historic or architectural significance by having one or more of the following criteria below:

1. Are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history; or
2. Are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past; or
3. Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction, or represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
4. That has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in history or prehistory.

The petitioner for this Local Historic Landmark designation is nominating this building under Criterion 1 for its significant contributions to the broad patterns of our history and Criterion 3 for architectural significance. The proposed Local Historic Landmark, the Mercantile Library Building, is a significant Cincinnati resource as defined by Chapter 1435 of the Cincinnati Zoning Code because it meets two of the criteria listed above (1 and 3).

On December 7, 2020, the Historic Conservation Board (HCB) voted unanimously to recommend the Local Historic Landmark designation of the Mercantile Library Building under Criterion 1 (historical significance) and 3 (architectural significance) to City Planning Commission and City Council.

HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE:

The Mercantile Library Building is significant under the following Criterion:

Criterion 1: *Association with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history:*

- The building was built in 1905 during the transformation of the Central Business District from low-scale mixed-use commercial buildings to tall “sky scrapers.”
- The association with the Young Men’s Mercantile Library as a private library and learning institution.
- The association with the Emery Family who were multi-generational leaders in Cincinnati business, civics, the arts, and real estate development.

Criterion 3: *Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, method of construction or that represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction:*

- The building was designed by the firm of Joseph G. Steinkamp, who were leading architects of the late 1800s and early 1900s in Cincinnati.
- The building is an example of Chicago Commercial Style Architecture, which was a popular style in Cincinnati during the transition from low-scale to high-rise buildings in the Central Business District.

The Designation Report in Attachment B further details the historic and architectural significance of the building.

ANALYSIS:

In making a determination, the City Planning Commission shall consider all of the following factors:

- (1) The relationship of the proposed designation to the comprehensive plans of the city and of the community in which the proposed Historic Landmark, Historic District or Historic Site is located; and

The designation of the Mercantile Library Building as a Local Historic Landmark is consistent with Plan Cincinnati (2012). In the Sustain Initiative Area, a Goal recommends to “preserve our natural and built environment” and “preserve our built history with new development incentives and regulatory measures” (pages 193-194).

- (2) The effect of the proposed designation on the surrounding areas and economic development plans of the city; and

Designating the Mercantile Library Building will assist in the renovation of the building by providing the opportunity to obtain necessary historic tax credits. The revitalization of the building will have a positive impact on the community and economic development plans of the city.

- (3) Such other planning and historic preservation considerations as may be relevant to the proposed designation.

This designation will assist in the redevelopment of this building meeting the demand for more housing options in the Central Business District.

The Local Historic Landmark designation of the Mercantile Library Building meets the requirements of Chapter 1435 of the Cincinnati Municipal Code (Historic Preservation). The documentation in the designation report (Attachment B) provides conclusive evidence that all required findings may be made for the proposed designation, which meets Criteria 1 and 3. This designation will help convert the office use to residential use providing additional housing in the Central Business District.

Per Chapter 1435- 07-2-C. - Adoption of Conservation Guidelines.

“At the time of designation of a Historic Landmark, Historic District or Historic Site, Council has the duty to adopt conservation guidelines for each Historic Landmark, Historic District or Historic Site. Conservation guidelines shall promote the conservation, development and use of the Historic Landmark, Historic District or Historic Site and its special historic, architectural, community or aesthetic interest or value. Insofar as practicable, conservation guidelines shall promote redevelopment and revitalization of Historic Structures and compatible new development within the Historic District. The guidelines shall not limit new construction within a Historic District to a single period or architectural style but may seek to preserve the integrity of existing Historic Structures. Conservation guidelines shall take into account the impact of the designation of a Historic Landmark, Historic District or Historic Site on the residents of the affected area, the effect of the designation on the economic and social characteristics of the affected area, the projected impact of the designation on the budget of the city.”

The proposed guidelines are attached to this staff report as Attachment C. The Historic Conservation Board and staff of the Department of City Planning have determined that the proposed guidelines are acceptable to meet the goal of preserving the architecture of this Historic Landmark.

PUBLIC COMMENT:

A joint virtual public staff conference with the Historic Conservation Office and the Department of City Planning was held on November 17, 2020. Notices were sent to property owners within a 400-foot radius of the proposed Local Historic Landmark designation and the Downtown Residents Council. The petitioner, developers, and City staff were the only persons in attendance. There has been no opposition to this proposed designation to-date.

CONSISTENCY WITH PLANS:

The designation of the Mercantile Library Building as a Local Historic Landmark is consistent with *Plan Cincinnati* (2012). Specifically, within the Sustain Initiative Area, a Goal recommends to “preserve our natural and built environment” and “preserve our built history with new development incentives and regulatory measures” (pages 193-194). It is also consistent with the Live Initiative Area, within Goal 3 that states to “Provide a full spectrum of housing options, and improve housing quality and affordability” (page 164).

RECOMMENDATION:

The staff of the Department of City Planning recommends that the City Planning Commission take the following actions:

1. **APPROVE** the proposed Local Historic Landmark designation of the Mercantile Library Building at 414 Walnut Street in the Central Business District, as described in the “The

Mercantile Library Building Historic Designation Report dated January 2, 2021” as seen in Attachment B;

2. **APPROVE** the attached map amendment designating the Local Historic Landmark as seen in Attachment A; and
3. **APPROVE** “The Mercantile Library Building Historic Conservation Guidelines dated January 2, 2021”as seen in Attachment C.

Respectfully submitted:

Approved:

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Department of City Planning

Katherine Keough-Jurs, AICP, Director
Department of City Planning