



CITY OF SAINT PAUL
Christopher B. Coleman, Mayor

*25 West Fourth Street
Saint Paul, MN 55102*

*Telephone: 651-266-6565
Facsimile: 651-228-3261*

DATE: May 6, 2013

TO: Neighborhood Planning Committee

FROM: Amy Spong, Historic Preservation Specialist

SUBJECT: Proposed designation of the *St. Paul Gas Light Company Island Station* as a Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Site

SITE DESCRIPTION

The St. Paul Gas Light Company Island Station Plant at 437 Shepard Road (380 Randolph Avenue, formerly 1 Ross Road; RA-SPC-3323) is located in Section 12 of Township 28N R23W, about two miles upstream from downtown St. Paul. It is in Planning District 9 (known as the West 7th/Fort Federation Community Council). The electric-steam plant occupies the foot of a peninsula on the west side of the Mississippi River about 100 feet from the shoreline. This peninsula was originally the 6-acre Ross Island and was reached by a wood bridge (razed). The west half of the island is now infilled in part by ashes sluiced out of the plant furnaces.

The structure was built in 1924 and designed and engineered by the notable firm of Toltz, King and Day (now TKDA). The plant structure rests on a concrete slab supported by more than 1,400 wooden piles. A one foot poured concrete base slab surmounts four feet of concrete reinforced with 140 tons of steel that comprises the plant foundation. Sidewalls of reinforced concrete 24 inches thick rise from the second slab 19 feet on the river-facing (south) elevation and 24.5 feet on the north elevation. The building is 227 feet long and 89 feet wide, with a stepped roofline 97.6 feet high running horizontally from the river 134 feet to near the center of the plant. Here it drops vertically to 61.7 feet and runs horizontally to the building's north terminus. No major alterations have been made to original dimensions.

The building exterior is articulated as four sections—coal preparation and pulverizing at the south end, followed by boiler, turbine, and switching sections—corresponding to four interior areas of operation. The exterior is clad in hard burned red brick laid in five-course American bond, with curtain walls of sand-lime faced brick. Each of the four sections are linked by paired white stone beltcourses at three levels. Most of the building is framed in structural steel; only the switching section is reinforced concrete. The exterior elevations are united by white stone trim edging the parapet and white stone beltcourses that integrate grouped windows of varying heights and dimensions. On the north elevation corresponding to the switching section there are six bays with square windows divided by beltcourses. A smooth stone enframement surrounds a pair of glazed doors at an entry at the northwest corner of the switching section. The entry is accessed by concrete steps.

PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE (1924-1973)

The period of significance extends from 1924, when Island Station was constructed through 1973 when NSP decommissioned the plant and stopped operation at this site.

CONFORMANCE TO LEGISLATIVE CODE

The St. Paul Legislative Code establishes seven criteria for the designation of heritage preservation sites (§73.05). The St. Paul Gas Light Company meets criteria 1 and 7.

Designation Criterion 1 (§73.05(a)(1)) states that the Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Commission (HPC) shall consider the following about the site:

Its character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the City of St. Paul, the State of Minnesota, or the United States

Island Station represented the St. Paul Gas Light Company's attempt to compete with NSP at a time when acquisition and consolidation of such companies was standard practice. St. Paul Gas Light Company became the city's chief gas supplier, but was never its leader in electric power production. The investment in this plant and its new coal pulverization technology, and in a Service Center at Rice and Atwater Streets (1925), demonstrates that the company intended to expand production to meet increasing demand. Investment in this plant did not actually result in a significant contribution to power generation in St. Paul, because after acquisition by NSP it was used in a standby capacity.

The planning and construction of this plant, however, is associated with the city's early 1920s neighborhood growth. This was based on reinvigorated railroad, warehousing, retail, and manufacturing interests, and corresponding demand for housing supplied with many types of electrical equipment. This included widely advertised, labor-saving household devices. As detailed in St. Paul's Historic Context, "Residential Real Estate Development: 1880-1950" and in "The St. Paul Gas Light Company and the Growth of Early Twentieth-Century St. Paul Neighborhoods," the early 1920s were an exceptional period for new housing and neighborhood infrastructure, particularly in the western half of the city including the Highland Park area.

Therefore, Island Station is recommended as meeting HPC Criterion 1 for its association with the growth of St. Paul and its neighborhoods during an important period of economic development.

Designation Criterion 7 (§73.05(a)(7)) states that the HPC shall consider the following about the district:

Its unique location or singular physical characteristic representing an established familiar visual feature of a neighborhood, community, or City of St. Paul

Island Station and its 289-foot smokestack are prominent landmarks against the downtown St. Paul skyline and upriver landscape of bluffs and bottomland forest. The vacant building, which declines in condition each passing year, is a well-known local landmark. Since decommissioning in 1973 the building and its setting have inspired artists, designers, explorers, students, neighbors, developers, and all those who imagine the possibilities of the place. Criterion 7 offers a way to address the importance of the building in the public's imagination. Therefore, it is recommended as meeting HPC Criterion 7.

BACKGROUND

1983-1984. The first comprehensive Historic Sites Survey in St. Paul was completed in 1983. The St. Paul Gas Light Company building was identified as a *Site of Major Significance* and listed in the Final Report. The building was also noted as significant under the category “Public Utility Buildings.” In 1984 Gary Phelps prepared a draft National Register of Historic Places Nomination for the “St. Paul Gas Light Company’s Island Station.” This nomination, which included historic context development for the St. Paul Gas Light Company, was prepared on behalf of the property owner, John L. Kerwin. The nomination recommended that the property was eligible for the NRHP but did not evaluate it under specific criteria. In 1984, a State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) memorandum reviewed the Phelps nomination and evaluated it under NRHP criterion A, B, and C. The SHPO found that the property did not meet the NRHP criteria for eligibility.

2003-2006. In 2003 the City of St. Paul prepared an Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) for the SpringPointe Development boat access and private marina. This project was within a mixed residential/commercial project that proposed 200 condominiums and 20,000 square feet of commercial space. The EAW noted that the Island Station was determined not eligible for listing in the NRHP but made no reference to the property meeting local criteria for designation.

The proposed replacement of the coal-fired High Bridge Power Plant (1924) at 501 Shepard Road with a natural gas-fired 2-on-1 combined cycle system required preparation of a *Phase I Architectural History Evaluation and Area of Potential Effect Scoping Study* as part of the Site Permit application. This study, which included historic context development for electric power generation in St. Paul and the metropolitan area, recommended that the NSP plant was not eligible for listing in the NRHP due to lack of significance. The *High Bridge Plant Effects Study* was completed in 2006. This and the previous study noted that the Island Station had been recommended by the SHPO as not eligible for listing in the NRHP.

2010-current. The creation of the Great River Passage Plan was a major multi-year effort and involved many community meetings and input. Public comment periods and reviews from various boards and commissions took place in 2012, including review by the HPC. During that time the City received an inquiry about demolishing the Island Station while draft language in the Great River Passage Plan envisioned reuse of the building and activating the site with private and public amenities. The City Council adopted an interim ordinance in August of 2012 prohibiting the issuance of city permits until the Great River Passage Plan was adopted and until an historic evaluation was completed for the site.

Carole Zellie of Landscape Research was hired and completed an *Historic Significance Evaluation Study for the St. Paul Gas Light Company Island Station* on March 15, 2013. The Study was presented to the Heritage Preservation Commission which accepted and forwarded the Study to the State Historic Preservation Office for review and comment. In addition, the HPC directed staff to commence a Designation Study which begins the process for consideration of Island Station to become a St. Paul Heritage Preservation Site under Leg. Code 73.05. The Great River Passage Plan was recently adopted by the City Council.

PLANNING COMMISSION REVIEW

As required by the Legislative Code 73.05 (b):

The heritage preservation commission shall advise the city planning commission of the proposed designation of a heritage preservation site, including boundaries, and a program for the preservation of a heritage preservation site, and secure from the city

planning commission its recommendation with respect to the relationship of the proposed heritage preservation designation to the comprehensive plan of the City of Saint Paul, its opinion as to the effect of the proposed designation upon the surrounding neighborhood, and its opinion and recommendation as to any other planning consideration which may be relevant to the proposed designation, together with its recommendation of approval, rejection or modification of the proposed designation. Said recommendation shall become part of the official record concerning the proposed designation and shall be submitted by the heritage preservation commission along with its recommendation concerning the proposed designation to the city council. The heritage preservation commission may make such modifications, changes and alterations concerning the proposed designations as it deems necessary in consideration of the recommendations of the city planning commission.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN CONFORMANCE

There are references, both generally and specifically, to the development of the Island Station area within the Comprehensive Plan and applicable neighborhood plans. The following is a list of applicable references in the Comprehensive Plan:

Historic Preservation Chapter

Strategy 3: Identify, Evaluate and Designate Historic Resources

3.11. Make the designation of significant historic resources as heritage preservation sites a priority for the City Council.

3.12. Designate historic resources, such as buildings, structures, objects, archaeological sites, historic districts, and landscapes as Saint Paul heritage preservation sites or historic districts.

Strategy 4: Preserve and Protect Historic Resources

4.3. Protect undesignated historic resources.

4.5. Acquire key threatened historic properties until a suitable owner can be found.

Strategy 5: Use Historic Preservation to Further Economic Development and Sustainability

5.3. Realize the full economic potential of key historic resources.

5.3.a. Rehabilitate key historic resources to serve as a catalyst for additional development in adjacent areas.

5.3.b. Integrate historic properties into new developments to strengthen sense of place and provide a link between old and new

Land Use Chapter

Strategy 1: Target Growth in Unique Neighborhoods

1.17 Promote a place, amenity, or activity that serves as a community focus and emphasizes the special identity of individual Neighborhood Centers.

1.54 Identify opportunity sites for future development consistent with the *Saint Paul Comprehensive Plan*, either as mixed-use development or as employment centers, including, but not limited to: Island Station is listed as an opportunity site.

Strategy 3: Promote Aesthetics and Development Standards

3.18 Support the protection and enhancement of the visibility of architectural landmarks.

Transportation Chapter

Strategy 2: Provide Balance and Choice

2.13(e) As a part of redevelopment or reinvestment, discourage the demolition of housing units or historic resources for new surface parking lots.

Parks and Recreation Chapter

Strategy 6: Connect the Entire City

Strategy 6.7 Recommends Shepard Road as part of completing the Grand Rounds Parkway.

RELATIONSHIP TO NEIGHBORHOOD PLANS

2013 The Great River Passage Plan

There are several references throughout the Plan that provide a vision and goals for preserving and redeveloping the Island Station to become a year-round destination. Specifically, two goals recommend redeveloping Island Station to become a center for river-oriented arts and leisure activities and to utilize redevelopment to link the West 7th Street corridor to the river.

An objective under History and Culture goals recommends a completion a cultural and historical inventory within the corridor prior to implementing elements of the Master Plan. Within the Valley Reach goals iconic places, like Island Station, are encouraged to be expanded and repurposed to create gathering places.

2010 District 9 Area Plan

There are references to the Island Station District 9 Area Plan and the summary, adopted by the City on July 7th, 2010, states "If Island Station is not redeveloped preserving the original building as housing, consider reuse of the site as a public park property and the building as a park facility.

2005 Fort Road Development Plan Summary

A goal identified in this Summary states the Island Station is to be redeveloped as housing with the following amenities: 1. Preserve the existing Island Station structure, 2. Develop walking paths to connect to other sites and, 3. Develop a marina.

EFFECT ON SURROUNDING NEIGHBORHOOD

Designation would have a positive effect on the surrounding neighborhood, both residential and commercial, and act as an anchor for redevelopment in the Ft. Road neighborhood and along this stretch of River. Having design review guidelines will help to insure the site develops while maintaining its architectural and historical character over the long term. Adopted planning documents for many years have stated a vision for redeveloping the site while preserving the existing structure for reuse.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Comprehensive Planning Committee recommend that the Planning Commission support the designation of the St. Paul Gas Light Company Island Station as a Saint Paul Heritage Preservation Site and the accompanying Preservation Program. A copy of the draft resolution will be handed out at the committee meeting.

Attachments:

1. Designation Activities Checklist
2. Part 1. St. Paul Gas Light Company Island Station Nomination
Part 2. St. Paul Gas Light Company Island Station Nomination
3. Part 3. Preservation Program for Island Station