

COUNCIL COMMUNICATION

	Number:	26-236	Meeting:	June 29, 2026
	Agenda Item:	63	Roll Call:	26-0791
	Submitted by:	Cody Christensen, Development Services Director		

AGENDA HEADING:

Consideration of a request from Graham Investment Company, represented by Jeff Hatfield, to demolish the structures in the vicinity of 401 Grand Avenue pursuant to Section 58-70 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance.

SYNOPSIS:

Graham Investment Company, represented by the Jeff Hatfield, is proposing to demolish the existing Brown Garage, located in the vicinity of 401 Grand Avenue. The garage is comprised of three (3) buildings, including 401 and 411 Grand Avenue, and 516 4th Street. The three (3) total buildings meet the criteria for landmark designation set forth in Section 58-58 of the Historic Preservation Ordinance. Since they meet the criteria for landmark designation, Section 58-70 of the ordinance requires the City Council to determine if the proposed demolition should be referred to the City's Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) for further study. The existing skywalk within the western portion of the structures would be retained.

FISCAL IMPACT: NONE

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

- Brown Garage consists of two (2) distinct buildings, including 401 Grand – a simple Commercial (or Chicago) architectural style, and 516 4th Street – most likely a simplified Victorian Italianate architectural style based on historic photographs.
- 516 4th Street was originally constructed as the Des Moines Auditorium, a 3,000-seat theater that opened in 1899. At the time, it was said to be the second-largest opera house in the country, behind only the Auditorium Theater in Chicago.
- The Des Moines Auditorium opened to speeches by then Iowa Governor Leslie M. Shaw, future Iowa Governor Albert B. Commins, and Des Moines Mayor John MacVicar. The site held numerous shows, concerts, and state political conventions.
- The Des Moines Auditorium building suffered devastating fires in 1900 and 1911, but each time was rebuilt and maintained until its closing in 1924.
- In 1928, the Des Moines Auditorium building was reopened as part of the Brown Garage, serving primarily as storage and overflow parking.

- 401 Grand was constructed in 1925 and initially built for auto sales, but hosted several other businesses, including a bowling alley, the Iowa Jewish News, Hawkeye Bindery, and – most recently – Domino’s Pizza and offices for Operation Downtown.
- 411 and 417 Grand Avenue – also constructed circa 1925 as part of the same development as 401 Grand – were constructed as an annex to the original Brown Garage which was located at 424 Chestnut Street. Today that site is 420 Watson Powell, Jr Way, home of the Des Moines MPO offices.
- At one point, the garage complexes’ 1,250 vehicle capacity made it the third largest parking garage in the world.
- While primarily a parking structure for guests at the Brown Hotel (formerly at the northwest corner of what is today 4th Street and Watson Powell Jr. Way), Brown Garage also served as the primary parking facility for travelers to and residents of Des Moines visiting one (1) of the three (3) majestic theaters, other hotels, and restaurants that occupied this area of downtown.
- The garage was sold to Graham Investment Co in 1982 by descendants of Ernest W. Brown, the namesake of the garage and hotel.
- City staff finds the buildings meet several of the City’s Landmark designation criterion, as listed below.

Sec. 58-58 Designation Criteria

(a) For purpose of this article, a landmark or landmark site designation may be placed on any site, natural or improved, including any building, improvement or structure located thereon that possesses integrity of location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association and that:

- (1) Is significant in American history, architecture, archaeology and culture;*
 - (2) Is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history;*
 - (3) Is associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;*
 - (4) Embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values, or represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or*
 - (5) Has yielded or may be likely to yield information important in prehistory or history.*
- The City Council is charged with determining if the request should be referred to the HPC for further study or if no additional evaluation is necessary. Section 58-70(d) of the City Codes states that “the City Council will consider oral and written comments from all interested parties and determine whether or not to refer the application for proposed demolition or related plumbing work to the HPC for further study and review.”
 - If the application is not referred to the HPC, the owner will be required to document and photograph the exterior and interior of the building and provide the city with a copy in

coordination with Development Services Department staff. The owner is also required to salvage for re-use as many fixtures and as much material as possible from the building. Provided that the owner has conducted the documentation and salvage processes to the satisfaction of the Development Services Director, then issuance of a demolition permit in accordance with Section 26-303 and related plumbing permit in accordance with the Plumbing Code shall be authorized.

- If the application is referred to the HPC, the commission shall hold a meeting and work with the owner to determine, within 90 days, whether any alternatives to demolition are feasible. Such alternatives to be considered may include, but are not limited to, the following:
 - (1) The building or structure can be considered for landmark designation.
 - (2) Rehabilitation of the building or structure with the assistance of federal or state tax incentives or other private financial assistance.
 - (3) Adapting the building or structure to a viable new use.
 - (4) Finding a new owner who is interested in purchasing, preserving and rehabilitating the building or structure.
 - (5) Incorporating the building or structure into the owner's plans for redevelopment of the site.
 - (6) Assisting the owner in finding an alternative site for its proposed redevelopment.
 - (7) Moving the building or structure to an alternative site.
- If the Commission and the owner do not reach an agreement on a feasible alternative to demolition, the owner will be required to document and photograph the exterior and interior of the building and provide the City with a copy in coordination with Development Services Department staff. The owner is also required to salvage for re-use as many fixtures and as much material as possible from the building. Provided that the owner has conducted the documentation and salvage processes to the satisfaction of the Development Services Director, then issuance of a demolition permit in accordance with Section 26-303 and related plumbing permit in accordance with the Plumbing Code shall be authorized.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL ACTION(S): NONE

BOARD/COMMISSION ACTION(S): NONE

ANTICIPATED ACTIONS AND FUTURE COMMITMENTS: NONE

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