

**TESTIMONY OF DR. FRED L. MCGHEE BEFORE THE AUSTIN CITY COUNCIL
REGARDING THE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OF THE DEAF, BLIND & ORPHAN
SCHOOL, DECEMBER 18, 2008, AUSTIN CITY HALL**

Good afternoon, Mr. Mayor, Mr. Mayor Pro-Tem, and distinguished members of the Austin City Council.

My name is Fred McGhee and I rise, with passion, to ask you to affirm the unanimous votes of the historic landmark commission and the planning commission and to reject the recommendation of city staff in this zoning case. The two buildings in question are viable and the staff adaptive reuse estimate is inflated and uninformed. I speak not just on behalf of the organizations which I lead, Black Austin Democrats and the Montopolis Neighborhood Association, but also with the support of distinguished heritage preservation organizations such as the Heritage Society of Austin. I believe that you are in receipt of a letter from the Texas Historical Commission about this matter, and I have forwarded to you and your staffs copies of letters from Fred Michael Beam of the National Black Deaf advocates in Maryland and from Doctors Carolyn McCaskill and Ceil Lucas of Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C., who are co-principal investigators of a National Science Foundation funded study of Black American Sign Language and who support the preservation of the remaining buildings on the campus. If any of you do not have copies of these letters, I have copies of them with me and would be glad to furnish you with them.

The reason why this property should be zoned as a public historic landmark is because it is historic, not just at the City of Austin level, but as a landmark of state or even national significance. This may seem obvious *now*, but it was not always the case. As things stand today, most of the buildings on the campus have already been demolished. In an egregious example of bad historic preservation management, no qualified historic preservation consultant *to this day* has had the chance to assess the *total* integrity of the school site and produce a formal report of its significance. In its zoning change review report to you, city staff reaches uninformed and racially biased conclusions that unfortunately remain as disturbing as they have become habitual. I encourage you to read or re-read the letter from the Texas Historical Commission to you for a more professional analysis of the school's significance, one that goes well beyond building architecture to include history and culture, and the reasons why the history of Jim Crow segregation is important to the City of Austin, the State of Texas, and the United States in general.

It is true that proper preservation of these structures will take resources. It is also true that taken as a whole, the Austin City Council has not prioritized true historic preservation that is conducted in a systematic and integrated manner by qualified professionals who know the rules, understand the procedures, are familiar with the customary funding sources, and who have the respect of their peers. Are there funding sources available for projects of this nature? Of course there are, and others and I would be happy to work with you to identify those funding sources. But I wish to emphasize that the preservation of heritage, of history and culture, are ultimately not about money. How do you put a dollar figure on a group's way of life? Federal and state law, as well as local ordinance and tradition, recognize the value of heritage preservation and its role in economic and community development, education, the arts, and in our culture. Make a

decision that encompasses *the totality* of public interest considerations. Properly refurbished, these buildings would make a harmonious and fine addition to this part of East Austin.

Lastly, I would be remiss in my duty if I did not add my voice to those that have previously urged you bring in qualified people, to include architects, archaeologists, and historians, so that incidents such as this are avoided in the future. One thing is for certain: Austin is blessed with many historic buildings, traditional cultural places, and archaeological sites, whether at this school, Zilker Park, city-owned land in Webberville, or elsewhere, and I urge you to embrace this opportunity as a teachable moment that can hopefully lead to a systematic citywide approach where the diverse facets of the city bureaucracy can rely on an integrated approach to historic preservation with people in charge that do their jobs without fear or favor, who possess a dedication to public service, and who discharge their duties with a heartfelt respect for the culture and history of *all* of Austin.



TEXAS
HISTORICAL
COMMISSION

The State Agency for Historic Preservation

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December 17, 2008

The Hon. Will Wynn
Mayor, City of Austin
P. O. Box 1088
Austin, Texas 78767

RE: Texas Deaf Blind and Orphan School, 7201 Levander Loop, Austin, Travis County, Texas

Dear Mayor Wynn:

The Texas Historical Commission emphatically supports the preservation of the remaining buildings at the former Texas Deaf Blind and Orphan School, and requests that the City of Austin deny any permits that would lead to their demolition.

The former East Campus of the Texas School for the Deaf was established in 1959, and was later combined with the Texas School for the Deaf in 1965. The buildings at the site were designed in 1959 by the Houston architectural firm Rustay & Martin. The property is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion A, in the Areas of Education and Ethnic Heritage/Black at the state level of significance, for its association with education of deaf and blind African Americans during the Jim Crow era. The period of significance extends to 1965, when the Texas School for the Deaf was racially integrated. Because of its association with institutional segregation in Texas, the property meets Criteria Consideration G (*Properties that have achieved significance within the past fifty years*).

Austin, as the capital of Texas, is blessed with many historic buildings of statewide significance that reflect the influence of state government on our landscape, including the State Capitol, the Governor's Mansion, the old State Asylum, and numerous other office buildings and institutions. The City of Austin greatly benefits from the location of these landmarks within city limits, and should not take its role as a steward of its historic buildings and landscapes for granted. The Texas Deaf Blind and Orphan School campus, while owned by the City of Austin, must be recognized for its statewide significance, and the decision whether or not to demolish the remaining buildings should be considered only in recognition of the city's responsibility to serve as a steward of our state's collective heritage.

The Texas Historical Commission vehemently disagrees with the city staff recommendation to release a demolition permit for the majority of buildings on the site, while recommending the investigation to retain the two most "architecturally interesting" buildings on campus (report of August 28, 2008). We are greatly concerned that city staff only considered the architectural significance of the property while dismissing – perhaps not even considering – the obvious cultural and historic associations of the campus. The strict application of an age criterion in this

instance, and the fact that building designs will reach the 50-year mark within a matter of months (and now weeks), is a mechanical and bureaucratic approach to a complex situation, and is not indicative of thoughtful preservation planning.

The Texas Deaf Blind and Orphan School was a segregated institution, and for this reason alone, it deserves special consideration when addressing its historic significance. The history of segregation, the Civil Rights Movement, and integration are widely understood historical contexts, and the Texas Historical Commission has nominated to the National Register numerous properties representing these aspects of Texas history. The National Register recognizes the exceptional significance of such properties, and regularly lists them with periods of significance extending well into the 1960s. Many of these properties in Austin, such as the Teachers State Association Building and the Huston-Tillotson Administration Building in Austin, along with numerous colleges, schools, and commercial buildings statewide, represent the initiative of African Americans, who, working under the repression of Jim Crow laws, strove to better themselves and their communities through the creation of nondiscriminatory businesses, organizations, and institutions. Other properties, such as the Texas Deaf Blind and Orphan School, represent the application of state and local segregation laws to public institutions, and the active role of the government in separating its citizens on the basis of race. But even in this light, the Texas Deaf Blind and Orphan School also represents the hard work and devotion of an untold number of teachers, administrators, and other professionals who labored to help generations of children, as well as the education of students who benefitted from attendance at state schools, despite their segregated status.

It is our hope that the City of Austin will find a suitable use for these buildings, or sell them to an entity that will be dedicated to their adaptive reuse. Recognition of a property's historic significance through listing in the National Register could qualify each building for a 20% investment tax credit if the property is rehabilitated for commercial use following the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation. Additionally, our staff in the Division of Architecture could provide technical assistance for any work on the buildings. If you have any questions, you may contact me at 512/463-6013 or by email at greg.smith@thc.state.tx.us. Thank you for your interest in preserving Texas' cultural heritage.

Sincerely,



Gregory W. Smith
National Register Coordinator

cc: Preservation Texas
Travis County Historical Commission
Austin Heritage Society
City of Austin Planning and Zoning Department