



# Memorandum

**TO:** HONORABLE MAYOR AND  
CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** Joseph Horwedel

**SUBJECT: FORMER DR. MARTIN LUTHER  
KING, JR. LIBRARY HISTORIC  
LANDMARK NOMINATION**

**DATE:** May 23, 2008

Approved

Date

5/23/08

**COUNCIL DISTRICT:** 3

**SNI AREA:** Not Applicable

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Decline to proceed with landmark designation of the Former Martin Luther King Library (Former MLK) as a City Landmark.

## **OUTCOME**

The decision to initiate the landmark process for the building will result in the process starting or ending.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The City-owned Former Dr. Martin Luther King Library Jr. Main Library Building, located at 180 West San Carlos Street is being considered as a potential historic resource. In April 2008, Archives and Architecture completed the historical and architectural evaluation for the building that found that the former Library would appear to exceed the qualification threshold of 67 points for City Landmark status, rating 104 out of 134 possible points. The analysis was forwarded to the Historic Landmarks Commission for their recommendation as to determine if the building should be considered for designation as a City Landmark.

The Commission voted 5-1 to forward a recommendation to the City Council that the Building be considered for landmark status and that the process be initiated.

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Staff has reviewed the reports and the building and considered the City, State and National standards for the designations as buildings and places as historic resources. The staff conclusions are that while the building exhibits some features that may individually suggest designation might be appropriate, taken as a whole, the structure does not warrant designation as a City Landmark. The factors that indicate the building does not merit designation include the age of the building, the lack of any sort of professional recognition of the building as a prime example of the Brutalist style of architecture, and that the building does not represent a significant quality symbol of the Post War Years growth period of the City.

## **BACKGROUND**

The City-owned, Former Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Main Library Building, located at 180 W. San Carlos Street, is a six-story, board-formed concrete building, designed from 1965 to 1967 and completed in 1970 within the late modern (1930-1970) architectural period. The San Jose Redevelopment Agency commissioned the environmental firm of LSA, Inc. to prepare the environmental documentation for an Initial Study to consider the potential effects of a public project to expand the San Jose McEnery Convention Center, including demolition of the former MLK Main Library building. In April 2008, qualified historical consultants, Archives and Architecture, completed the historical and architectural evaluation for the building.

The evaluation states that the building would not qualify for historic landmark designation on the National Register of Historic Places and the California Register of Historical Resources due to age consideration for properties less than 50 years old. However, according to the qualified historical consultants, the Former Library would appear to exceed the typical qualification threshold of 67 points for City Landmark status, rating 104 out of 134 possible points.

Because of the consultant's analysis of the scoring for the building under the City methodology and the City Council Policy on Historic Preservation, the Historic Preservation Officer forwarded the City Landmark nomination to the Historic Landmarks Commission to start the public process for candidate City Landmark designation and to establish whether the Landmarks Commission concurred with the Historic Report findings that the Former MLK Main Library qualifies as a candidate City Landmark. A staff report was prepared for the Historic Landmarks Commission that described the potential landmark designation and is attached.

### **Landmarks Commission Action**

On May 7, 2008 the Historic Landmarks Commission held a public hearing to consider nominating the building for City Landmark (CL) designation in the manner prescribed by the Historic Preservation Ordinance (Chapter 13.48 of the Municipal Code).

As more fully discussed in a separate transmittal memo, dated May 12, 2008 to the Council detailing the Historic Landmarks Commission's action and recommendation of the matter, the Commission considered the item at a public hearing. During the discussion, Commissioner Cunningham stated that the case had not been adequately made that the library was significant either because it was located in the second fastest growing U.S. City

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during this period in the nation's history, or because it was a unique architectural design. He noted that the Brutalist architectural style was commonly found on California's community college campuses during this time period. He was further reluctant to support designation of resources less than fifty years old when the Commission has had difficulty recommending the preservation of older resources.

The Historic Landmarks Commission then made a motion to find that the building exemplifies the cultural, economic, social or historic heritage of the City of San Jose and recommend the City Council initiate proceedings to nominate the former MLK Main Library Building as a City Landmark, based on the following criteria from the Historic Preservation Ordinance (5-1-1, Cunningham opposed, Lavelle absent):

1. *Its character, interest, or value as part of the local, regional, state or national history, heritage, or culture as a post-World War II library built to house the primary circulation and reference collections of the City and to act as a primary symbol of the City's expanding library system during a period of rapid growth when San Jose was the second fastest growing city in the nation; and*
6. *Its embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen, as a unique example of local institutional Brutalist design within the late-Modern architectural movement; with expressive, rough-textured concrete, boldly sculptural forms, and classically referential elements such as archways and tile bulkheads.*

## **ANALYSIS**

There are three main issues to be considered in the decision to initiate landmark designation for the Martin Luther King Library building. These are:

1. Should the City landmark a building that is less than 50 years old?
2. What is the building's character, interest, or value as part of the local, regional, state or national history, heritage, or culture?
3. Does the building embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen?

The decision making process to consider landmarking a property is prescribed in the San Jose Municipal Code in Section 13.48.110. The criteria for a structure or property to qualify as a City Landmark sets forth several different rationales for the designation including ones similar to the second and third questions raised above.

1. Should the City designate a building less than 50 years old?

The National Register of Historic Places establishes minimum age criterion for designation of historic resources of 50 years, while the California Register of Historical Resources guidelines states that resources should be at least 50 years old. San Jose's Preservation Ordinance, like many municipalities', provides City Landmark criteria

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tailored to the individual perspective of its local historians and citizens, separate and apart from National and California Register criteria. The City ordinance does not have a minimum age requirement. The Ordinance language advises that although the Historic Landmarks Commission and City Council may consider the historical perspective of age, they shall initially consider eight primary factors, first among those being the local context and unique nature of places that represent eras that have contributed to the City's culture in an important way.

The Ordinance clarifies that the factor of age alone does not necessarily confer a special historical significance, but may especially be considered when few examples exist. This language allows special consideration for both especially old, albeit fairly vernacular, resources such as Victorians as well as relatively young but unique resources such The Orange Roadside Restaurant (Marks Hot Dogs).

The designation of structures as historic that are less than 50 years old on the grounds of architectural significance should be reserved for all but the finest examples of a particular style of architecture. The Archives and Architecture analysis states this clearly:

*Properties considered historically significance are those that have withstood the test of time. It is generally understood that some detachment is needed to understand, evaluate and establish the significance of a resource. Without the perspective of time, historical significance could be based – perhaps undeservedly – on popularity, taste, sentimentality, expediency, or class values, which might distort the designation process. Buildings less than 50 years of age are generally considered too young to have gained historical perspective. There are some properties, however, that although less than 50 years in age clearly reflect an aspect of community values in a significant way, and who's physical presence appear to instill a sense of timeliness. These properties are considered to have an "exceptional importance."*

Those last two sentences are the crux of the question for the Martin Luther King Library building. Does the building clearly reflect an aspect of community values in a significant way? While the analysis includes numerous reference to people, events, and the like, do any of those people, events clearly reflect the values of San Jose to such a significant degree, that the building should be designated as a landmark despite it not being 40 years in age, much less 50 years in age. A simple measure of that level of significance is if the person on the street can make that association for a newer resource, it probably warrants consideration sooner than 50 years of age.

In the case of the Martin Luther King Library building, the answer is no. It does not rise to that level of significance because the associations with events and people are not significant enough as noted later in this memo to warrant designation. To designate a building of its current age should only occur when there is overwhelming documentation of the significance of the building. Clearly that is not the case with this building.

2. What is the building's character, interest, or value as part of the local, regional, state or national history, heritage, or culture?

The analysis by Archives and Architecture states that:

*Within the theme of Government and Public Services, and the context of libraries built during the early years of the Period of Industrialization and Suburbanization (1945-1991), the former Main Library has significance for being both a major library building constructed by the people of San José within a special municipal bond election, and as a distinguished structure constructed within a period of rapid growth after World War II.*

The significance of the building is that it was built during the period that San Jose was growing at an explosive rate and needed to deliver basic services to its residents. The City was building facilities across the City at furious pace, making tough choices on how to get the most in the way of facilities for the least expense. Examples of this strategy remain to this day where fire stations were housed in converted tract house that the City is just in the last 5 years finally replaced. Branch libraries, when built, were undersized for the communities, they served. The facilities were typically very utilitarian and simple enough to meet the needs of the residents.

The historic analysis notes, "The building was originally planned as part of a larger civic plaza. The library was intended to be the centerpiece of an area similar to Lincoln Center in New York City-a broad, raised plaza accented by discrete, monumental civic buildings. The remaining buildings in that master plan were never constructed."

Under this criterion, the candidate Landmark should help tell the story of a period of history for the community. The decision to make it a Landmark is based on how well the building does in supporting the story about the community at that time. The story that the building tells in this case is that the City was growing, there were grand plans for the civic buildings, the Former MLK Library is the only physical expression of those grand plans, and the community was unable to fulfill those aspirations (except for construction of the Library itself, at the time the largest City building every constructed) and did the best it could.

So, while the building was built as the new Main Library during a time of expansive growth in the City, the question remains does the building's character, interest, or value in explaining the local, regional, state or national history, heritage, or culture warrant designation as a City Landmark?

The answer is again no. The building does not clearly reflect an aspect of community values in a significant way that tells the story of the period of growth of the City nor does it in its current setting help the community understand the values of San José at that time. In fact, the building is part of a plan that never materialized.

3. Does the building embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen?

The guidelines for designation of a structure for as a City Landmark for architectural significance state that the structure should meet one or more of four criteria. These are:

- Its portrayal of the environment of a group of people in an era of history characterized by a distinctive architectural style;
- Its embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen;
- Its identification as the work of an architect or master builder whose individual work has influenced the development of the City of San Jose;
- Its embodiment of elements of architectural or engineering design, detail, materials or craftsmanship which represents a significant architectural innovation or which is unique.

As discussed previously, the historic analysis noted, "The building was originally planned as part of a larger civic plaza. The library was intended to be the centerpiece of an area similar to Lincoln Center in New York City—a broad, raised plaza accented by discrete, monumental civic buildings." The remaining buildings in that master plan were never constructed. As noted in the report, the setting for the Library structure has changed since it was built so that the building no longer sits in an open space; it is instead hemmed in by later development. The report notes, "The building appears almost as though it was a citadel isolated by a moat, rather than a gracious civic monument set in a park." The McEnery Convention Center now provides the backdrop for the Former MLK Library structure.

The Former MLK Library building is a unique example of the Brutalist Style of architecture in San Jose according to the consultant's analysis. As noted by Commissioner Cunningham, this style of architecture can be found in many public buildings of the era around the State. Other local examples are the Police Administration Building at 201 West Mission, and the Family Court Building on Almaden Boulevard in Downtown San Jose.

Staff believes that designation as a landmark for architectural significance should ensure that the architectural relevance and association are in fact significant. This becomes critical where unique buildings are proposed as landmarks because of their unique nature. Just because a building has a unique architectural style in the community should not be the main rationale to approve a landmark designation. The City needs to ensure that those unique structures are architecturally significant at a broader, State or National level.

According to the analysis, the building has not received recognition on a broader scale for architectural significance. While the designer of the building, Norton S. Curtis, is (he remains living, although no longer practicing) a prolific local architect, his work has not

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been cited in professional journals or received professional recognition as a leading architect in California.

While the building is certainly a unique style of architecture, the question remains does the building embody distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen that warrants designation as a City historic landmark?

The answer again is no. It does not raise to that level of significance because the building setting has been compromised by the construction of the Convention Center, the building has not received recognition from the architectural community as a leading example of the architectural style, and other better examples exist in the region as noted in the staff report to the Historic Landmarks Commission.

### Conclusion

The Former Martin Luther King Library building was built at a period of phenomenal City growth and helped meet the needs of the community at that time in providing a centralized home for the City library system. However, the building and its setting has significantly changed over time. Most notably is the construction of the Convention Center directly behind it and the fact that the building was intended to be part of a larger public space plan that never materialized. The building was designed to make a statement about the community. Debate about the quality and nature of that statement continues even to today, which in itself is a rationale of why the building should not be designated as a landmark before it is at least 50 years of age, as required for National Register of Historic Places. The National Register requires buildings less than 50 years to be of exceptional importance and City Landmark criteria are different and silent on age criteria, which previously had required 30 years.

Finally, the library is neither significant because it was located in the second fastest growing U.S. City during this period in the nation's history nor because it is a unique architectural design. The Brutalist architectural style was commonly found on California's community college campuses during this time period. The fact of being located in a fast growing area is not a basis for designating buildings as landmarks.

### EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP

N/A

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## **POLICY ALTERNATIVES**

### ***Alternative # 1: Proceed with Landmark designation***

**Pros:** The building could be considered for designation as a City Landmark. The Convention Center Expansion project would analyze the potential for adaptive reuse of the building into the proposed project.

**Cons:** The building does not warrant designation as a City Historic Landmark as noted in the memo.

**Reason for not recommending:** The building does not warrant designation as a City Landmark as noted in the staff report. Designation of the building as a City Landmark despite its age and relevance would lower the threshold for other buildings to become City Landmarks. The designation would potentially undermine the credibility of the City's Historic Preservation program.

## **PUBLIC OUTREACH**

The propose initiation of the landmark designation was agendized on the Historic Landmarks Commission agenda of May 2008. If the Council chooses to initiate the designation of the building the designation process would include public hearings at the Historic Landmarks Commission and the City Council. Reports and information has been posed on the City's website for the Historic Landmarks Commission meeting and the City Clerk for this action.

**Criteria 1:** Requires Council action on the use of public funds equal to \$1 million or greater.  
**(Required: Website Posting)**

**Criteria 2:** Adoption of a new or revised policy that may have implications for public health, safety, quality of life, or financial/economic vitality of the City.  
**(Required: E-mail and Website Posting)**

**Criteria 3:** Consideration of proposed changes to service delivery, programs, staffing that may have impacts to community services and have been identified by staff, Council or a Community group that requires special outreach. **(Required: E-mail, Website Posting, Community Meetings, Notice in appropriate newspapers)**

## **COORDINATION**

The designation of the Former Martin Luther King Library building has been discussed with the Redevelopment Agency and the City Attorney's Office extensively. This report was coordinated with the Redevelopment Agency and the City Attorney's Office.

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**FISCAL/POLICY ALIGNMENT**

N/A

**CEQA**

Not a project.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Joseph Horwedel", written in a cursive style.

JOSEPH HORWEDEL, DIRECTOR  
Planning, Building and Code Enforcement

For questions, please contact Joseph Horwedel at 408-535-7900.

Attachments:

Staff Report to HLC

Transmittal Memo from HLC



# Memorandum

**TO:** HONORABLE MAYOR  
AND CITY COUNCIL

**FROM:** Historic Landmarks Commission

**SUBJECT:** SEE BELOW

**DATE:** May 19, 2008

**COUNCIL DISTRICT:** 3  
**SNI AREA:** Not Applicable

**SUBJECT: HISTORIC LANDMARK INITIATION FOR THE FORMER MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. (MLK) MAIN LIBRARY BUILDING (HL08-170)**

## RECOMMENDATION

The Historic Landmarks Commission voted (5-1-1, Cunningham opposed, Lavelle absent) to recommend that the City Council adopt a resolution to:

1. Initiate proceedings to consider the former MLK Main Library building as a landmark of special historic, architectural, cultural, aesthetic or engineering interest or value of a historic nature.
2. Set a public hearing on August 26, 2008, at 1:30 p.m.
3. Refer the matter back to the Historic Landmarks Commission for its consideration at a public hearing, report and recommendation.

## OUTCOME

Council initiation of the former MLK Main Library building City Landmark designation would begin the process to consider designation of the building as a landmark of special historic, architectural, cultural, aesthetic or engineering interest or value of a historic nature, according to the provisions of the Historic Preservation Ordinance.

## BACKGROUND

On May 7, 2008 the Historic Landmarks Commission held a public hearing to consider nominating the former Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK) Main Library building, located at 180 W. San Carlos Street, for City Landmark (CL) designation in the manner prescribed by the Historic Preservation Ordinance (Chapter 13.48 of the Municipal Code).

## **ANALYSIS**

At the May 7, 2008 Historic Landmarks Commission hearing, Staff introduced the historic evaluation prepared by the professional consultant and explained that should the Commission concur with the findings in the evaluation, the Commission could forward a recommendation to the City Council to initiate the City Landmark designation process.

Judith Henderson of Preservation Action Council San Jose stated that PAC SJ supported the nomination of the former library which she believed was significant both as a cultural institution and as a building in the Brutalist architectural style.

Commissioner Cunningham stated that the case had not been adequately made that the library was significant either because it was located in the second fastest growing U.S. city during this period in the Nation's history, or because it was a unique architectural design. He noted that the Brutalist architectural style was commonly found on California's community college campuses during this time period. He was further reluctant to support designation of resources less than fifty years old when the Commission has had difficulty recommending the preservation of older resources.

The Historic Landmarks Commission then made a motion to find that the building exemplifies the cultural, economic, social or historic heritage of the City of San Jose and recommend the City Council initiate proceedings to nominate the former MLK Main Library building as a City Landmark, based on the following criteria from the Historic Preservation Ordinance (5-1-1, Cunningham opposed, Lavelle absent):

1. *Its character, interest, or value as part of the local, regional, state or national history, heritage, or culture* as a post-World War II library built to house the primary circulation and reference collections of the City and to act as a primary symbol of the City's expanding library system during a period of rapid growth when San Jose was the second fastest growing city in the Nation; and
6. *Its embodiment of distinguishing characteristics of an architectural type or specimen*, as a unique example of local institutional Brutalist design within the late-Modern architectural movement; with expressive, rough-textured concrete, boldly sculptural forms, and classically referential elements such as archways and tile bulkheads.

## **EVALUATION AND FOLLOW-UP**

If the City Council adopts a resolution initiating the City Landmark designation, the designation would be referred to the Historic Landmarks Commission for its consideration at a public hearing, followed by report and recommendation back to Council. Council would then consider City Landmark designation of the building at a public hearing.

### **POLICY ALTERNATIVES**

Should the City Council choose not to initiate the City Landmark designation, the property would not be taken forward for listing as a City Landmark. The Planning Director, as the City's environmental review administrator, would then separately consider whether to treat the former MLK Main Library building as a historical resource under CEQA when completing the environmental clearance for the potential future expansion of the Convention Center.

### **PUBLIC OUTREACH/INTEREST**

- Criteria 1:** Requires Council action on the use of public funds equal to \$1 million or greater. **(Required: Website Posting)**
- Criteria 2:** Adoption of a new or revised policy that may have implications for public health, safety, quality of life, or financial/economic vitality of the City. **(Required: E-mail and Website Posting)**
- Criteria 3:** Consideration of proposed changes to service delivery, programs, staffing that may have impacts to community services and have been identified by staff, Council or a Community group that requires special outreach. **(Required: E-mail, Website Posting, Community Meetings, Notice in appropriate newspapers)**

Although this item does not meet any of the above criteria, the HLC agenda and HLC memorandum dated April 23, 2008 were posted on the PBCE website. This transmittal memorandum is also posted on the City's website, and planning staff has been available to respond to questions from the public. Should the City Council initiate the designation, staff will follow Council Policy 6-30; Public Outreach Policy for City Landmark designations. As required by the Historic Preservation Ordinance, a notice of the Historic Landmarks Commission and City Council public hearings for designation will be distributed to the owners and tenants of all properties located within 500 feet of the project site, posted on the City website, and published in a local newspaper.

### **COORDINATION**

The historic evaluation of this property was commissioned by the San Jose Redevelopment Agency. Planning staff met with Redevelopment Agency staff to discuss the City Landmark designation process on several occasions and coordinated the HLC nomination memorandum with Redevelopment Agency staff prior to the May HLC meeting.

### **FISCAL/POLICY ALIGNMENT**

Consideration of the Landmark initiation is consistent with applicable General Plan policies. The San Jose 2020 General Plan Urban Conservation/Preservation Major Strategy states that, at a strategic level, preservation activities contribute visual evidence to a sense of community. The

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Historic, Archaeological and Cultural Resources (HACR) policies state that the City should use the Area of Historic Sensitivity overlay and the City Landmark designation process of the Historic Preservation Ordinance to promote and enhance the preservation of historically or architecturally significant sites and structures.

**COST SUMMARY/IMPLICATIONS**

Not applicable.

**BUDGET REFERENCE**

Not applicable.

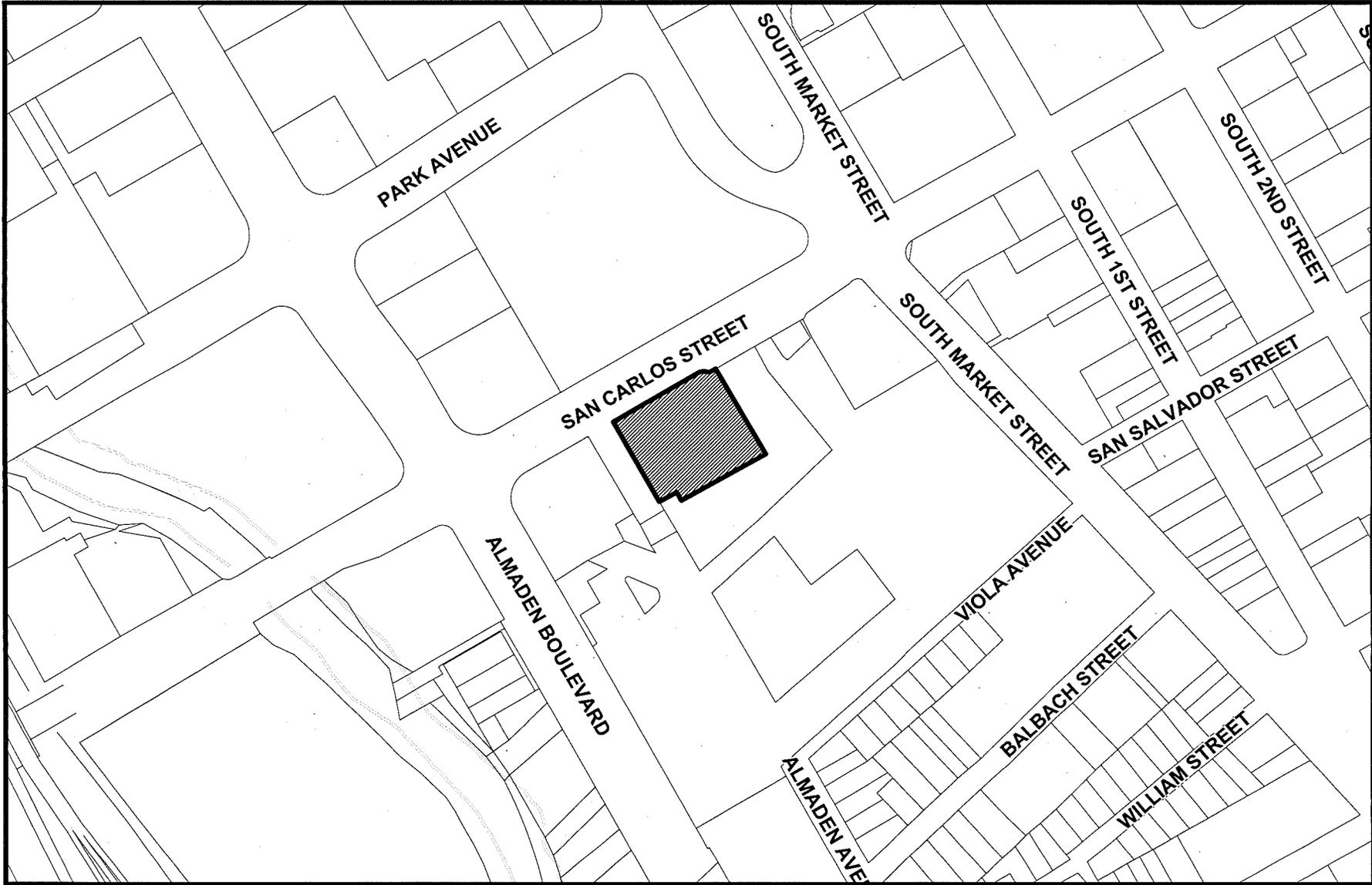
**CEQA**

Not a project

  
*FOR* JOSEPH HORWEDEL, SECRETARY  
Historic Landmarks Commission

For questions please contact Sally Zarnowitz, AIA, Historic Preservation Officer, at 408-535-7834.

Attachments: HLC Memorandum  
Map  
Historic Evaluation



Approx. Scale: 1" = 300'

Map Created On: 05/16/2008

Noticing Radius: 500 feet

File No: HL08-170

District: 3

Quad No: 83