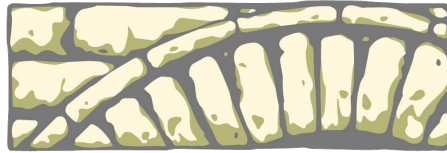


MADISON TRUST



for Historic Preservation

Advocacy News

February 2023

On February 7, the Madison Common Council Will Consider the Filene House Landmark Nomination

See highlighted information below for how you can express support!

By Kurt Stege

John Rolling graciously wrote an [opinion piece](#) (“Filene House Threatened”) for the December 2022 issue of the Advocacy News. John provided an overview of the local landmark nomination of the Filene House (1617 Sherman Avenue) he was then preparing for consideration by the Landmarks Commission. In his article, John outlined the incredible growth of the credit union movement in the U.S. and throughout the world, how Madison became the site for the Credit Union National Association (CUNA), and why President Truman seized the opportunity to officiate at the dedication of the building in 1950.

As John explained, Truman used the dedication as a means of articulating the basis for his Cold War foreign aid initiative that was focused on developing nations whose support could not be taken for granted in the U.S. confrontation with the Soviet Union. Truman saw the expansion of credit unions throughout the world as a healthy capitalist alternative to the expansion of communism being advanced by the Soviets. Truman’s speech set the stage for decades of foreign policy that followed.

One or more branches of CUNA continued their use of the Filene House until 1979. Since then, the building has served as office quarters for a number of organizations. Late in 2022, Vermilion Development of Chicago provided notice they intended to demolish the building in order to build a large housing project.

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What Has Happened So Far

John filed the actual landmark [nomination](#) with the Landmarks Commission on December 19, 2022. The extensive and highly readable nomination includes numerous pages of relevant images and a careful exposition of the historic significance of the building. If you have not done so already, I strongly encourage you to study the entire nomination to learn more about the credit union movement, the remarkable Edward Filene, and the role of the Filene House in American foreign policy.

The nomination was assigned [Legistar File # 75226](#). Various materials related to the Landmarks Commission review and public hearing may be viewed there.

On January 5, 2023, and at the recommendation of the Advocacy Committee, the Board of the Madison Trust filed a letter with the Commission in support of the nomination.



Filene House by John Rolling, November 22, 2022

A public hearing before the Commission was held on January 9, 2022. Both strong support and strong opposition were expressed during the testimony and in written submissions. The Landmarks Commission went on to unanimously recommend the Madison Common Council grant landmark status to the Filene House.

What Happens Now?

Because of the recommendation from the Landmarks Commission, the Filene House nomination has been placed on the agenda for the Madison Common Council meeting scheduled for February 7.¹ A majority vote of the Council in favor of the nomination is required before landmark status is granted.

As provided in [Sec. 41.07\(2\)](#), Madison General Ordinances, the Council has the discretion to designate a landmark as long as at least one of five distinct criteria is satisfied. The two criteria that have been cited by the nomination as applicable here are:

- (a) It is associated with broad patterns of cultural, political, economic or social history of the nation, state or community.

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¹ The agenda for the February 7th meeting of the Council won't be available to the public until about noon on Friday, February 3rd.

(b) It is associated with the lives of important persons or with important event(s) in national, state or local history.

A new Legistar File ([Legistar # 75633](#)) has been created now that the matter has reached the Council.

The Madison Trust will again be submitting a letter in support of the nomination and will also make formal appearances during the public hearing portion of the Council meeting.²

How You Can Express Your Support to the Common Council

- **Call to contact one or more alders by February 3rd**. Indicate this matter is of great interest to you and, if appropriate, that you live in the alder's district.³ If you wish, you are welcome to explain why you support the nomination.
- **Write to all the members of the City Common Council in advance of the meeting** to express your support of the nomination.
 - Send an email to allalders@cityofmadison.com. In order to provide the alders a reasonable opportunity to read your submission, **file it no later than February 3rd**. Make sure to reference the topic (Filene House landmark nomination), the meeting date (February 7), and Legistar # 75633. Written submissions should relate to the standards in [Sec. 41.07\(2\)](#) of the ordinances.
- **Register to speak at the February 7th hearing**. Once the City has created a page⁴ for the Council meeting on February 7, it will be accessible on the [meeting schedule](#) and you will then have ready access to all the relevant information. Testimony is limited to 3 minutes. Registration in advance is required and is explained on the page. Meetings commence at 6:30 p.m. but all council meetings are remarkably long. Once again, effective comments will relate to the standards in Sec. 41.07(2).

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² A Council decision to designate the Filene House as a landmark does not ensure the survival of the building. That is true because Vermilion Development filed its project application on January 20th, a date before any landmark designation would become effective. When the proposed project (which would include the demolition of the Filene House) is eventually reviewed by the city's Plan Commission, the review is supposed to be conducted as if the nomination had never been filed, a nearly impossible chore. However, even if the Plan Commission can ignore the hoped-for landmark status, the Plan Commission will still be guided by the advisory recommendation of the Landmarks Commission on November 14, 2022, that the Filene House has historic value.

³ If you don't know who your alder is, or how to make contact, visit [Madison Alders](#) Use one of the "Find Your Alder" options in the right hand column, or, if you already know your district, click on the photo of the alder for contact information.

⁴ At the time this article was written, the page had not been created.

Additional Information

The arguments opposing the landmark nomination are well summarized in an [article written by Dave Cieslewicz](#) that was published in Isthmus. [John Rolling's excellent response](#) is well worth reading.

There are a variety of topics that warrant mentioning when asserting support for landmarking the Filene House:

- ◆ Madison is the center of the credit union movement in the United States (more than 120 million members) and around the world (about 300 million members).
- ◆ The Filene House was the initial permanent structure built for the Credit Union National Association and for Credit Union International.
- ◆ In addition to serving as the “father” of credit unions in this country, the building’s namesake, Edward Filene, promoted its expansion world-wide, supplied the necessary financial support to achieve the movement’s success, was a pioneering business-person who played important roles in advancing workers compensation and unionism, was a founder of the first chamber of commerce, countered fascist propaganda in the 1930s, and was dedicated to reducing financial and social inequality in the United States.
- ◆ President Harry Truman dedicated the Filene House in 1950 and used his nationally broadcast address as an opportunity to push the country away from isolationism and to advance the credit union movement internationally as an important element in the nation’s foreign policy during the Cold War.

If you have any questions, please contact Kurt Stege at (608) 772-7614 or advocacy@madisonpreservation.org.