



September 20, 2005

RE: Old Hattiesburg High School

Dear Concerned Citizen:

I am writing to you on behalf of the Historic Hattiesburg Downtown Association regarding the need for immediate financial assistance to save the Old Hattiesburg High School, listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The scope of the destruction and loss that befell the historic structures throughout the Gulf Coast Region by Hurricane Katrina is beyond belief. While thousands of historic homes and buildings fell prey to the fierce storm surge, hundreds of inland structures throughout the South Mississippi interior received winds that were in excess of 100 mph. According to the National Weather Service, the Hattiesburg area sustained winds of 95 mph with wind gusts in excess of 110 mph. As the storm subsided and we were able to survey our historic treasures in the Downtown area, in particular the Old Hattiesburg High School, our initial response was one of relief as the structure appeared to stand as majestically as it had when it welcomed students every morning nearly fifty years ago. Yet the relief has quickly turned to alarm as the Historic Hattiesburg Downtown Association (HHDA) is organizing its efforts to replace the roof and windows removed or destroyed by the storm.

The Old Hattiesburg High School is actually comprised of two brick structures; the 1911 building is a handsome three-story building while the 1921 addition is a striking four-story building designed by a prominent Hattiesburg architect in the 'Jacobethan' style. Together, they comprise nearly eighty-thousand square feet that once contained lofty classroom spaces, grand stairways and corridors, an enchanting interior courtyard, and a sophisticated auditorium. The Old Hattiesburg High School is proclaimed by architectural historians to be one of the finest of the few examples of 'Jacobethan' architecture in Mississippi.

The building served as a public high school until 1959 and then as administrative offices for the Hattiesburg Public School District during the 1980's. In 1987, it was added to the National Register of Historic Places. Sadly, the third-level auditorium was eventually condemned due to neglect even as an antique business operated out of the remainder of the building. In 2001 the tenant vacated the building leaving the unoccupied structure vulnerable to an accelerated demise.

The importance of this historic jewel has not been overlooked by HHDA. In realizing its potential for cultural and economic development for Downtown Hattiesburg, HHDA purchased the building in the summer of 2002 and established Hattiesburg Landmark Preservation, Inc., a 501(c)(3) tax exempt non-profit organization to qualify for public grants. HHDA was able to secure limited grant funds to protect the building from further deterioration by weather, squatters, and vermin. In 2003, the Mississippi Heritage Trust listed the Old Hattiesburg High School on their *10 Most Endangered Historic Places List* thereby calling attention to the dire need for a timely rescue of the building.

In the meantime, the heads of nearly a dozen Hattiesburg public organizations including the University of Southern Mississippi (USM), the City of Hattiesburg, the Hattiesburg Public School District, the Area Development Partnership, HHDA and a handful of other civic and community groups formed the Southern Mississippi Arts and Restoration Team (SMART). The goal of SMART is to enhance the cultural, artistic, educational, business, and transportation offerings in Downtown Hattiesburg.

The University of Southern Mississippi introduced a major component necessary toward fulfilling the goal of SMART when they publicly announced their desire to relocate their Department of Art and Design to the Old Hattiesburg High School. In addition, plans to move the University's Museum of Art that currently attracts over 20,000 visitors annually have been discussed. While the presence of hundreds of Southern Miss art students and dozens of faculty would stimulate the need for residential and commercial growth, the addition of a first rate art museum would provide a tourism anchor in Downtown Hattiesburg. The result of such a project, falling in line with the goals of SMART, would provide Mississippi with a unique educational offering, as well as a historic treasure that the public could access on a daily basis.

In response to the developing reality of the Old Hattiesburg High School project, the City of Hattiesburg partnered with HHDA to secure grant money used to hire Albert & Associates Architects to survey the property and create a set of measured drawings. Furthering the project along, USM funded a pre-design phase to include a feasibility study and cost projection for rehabilitating the Old Hattiesburg High School to serve as the new home of the Department of Art and Design and the Museum of Art. In fact, USM was scheduled to publicly unveil the pre-design phase on Thursday, September 1, 2005. Unfortunately, Hurricane Katrina caused the postponement of this major event until further notice.

HHDA, the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, and Albert & Associates Architects formally reviewed the structure on September 19, 2005. Upon touring the facility, the group was greatly saddened to see that while the structure appears healthy, a great deal of the envelope protecting the structure has been compromised. A large portion of roof over the stage of the auditorium is destroyed leaving the steel and wood structure, as well as the floors below, exposed to the weather; portions of the exterior load bearing walls are severely damaged; and many of the formerly boarded windows have fallen out leaving gaping holes throughout. It is the professional opinion

of the architect that if the envelope of the building is not repaired and sealed immediately, and the moisture laden contents removed, the building will not survive long enough to secure the funding for the rehabilitation project. HHDA feels that if the stabilization of the Old Hattiesburg High School is not addressed immediately, Mississippi will lose not only one of its finest works of architecture, but a major source of cultural and economic stimulation for Hattiesburg, one of its largest cities.

While HHDA began the process of securing a Community Heritage Preservation Grant from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History for roof and envelope repairs well before Hurricane Katrina struck, we are certain that we will need additional funds to save the Old Hattiesburg High School. Therefore, we are appealing to organizations that have expressed a commitment to aiding in the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast States and in particular to those whose passion is to preserve history while promoting economic and cultural growth. If you are able to contribute financially through a grant or donation, please contact Bernice Linton, Director of HHDA at 601-583-4329. Images of the damage from Hurricane Katrina as well as the images of the restoration project are viewable at www.albertassociates.com.

Sincerely,



Sarah M. Newton, Secretary
Historic Hattiesburg Downtown Association

Cc:

Ken P'Pool, Director of Historic Preservation, Mississippi Department of Archives & History
David Preziosi, Executive Director, Mississippi Heritage Trust
Elliott Pood, Dean, University of Southern Mississippi, College of Arts and Letters
Susan Fitzsimmons, Chair, University of Southern Mississippi, Department of Art and Design
Gray Swoope, Chief Operating Officer, Momentum Communities Assessment, MS Development Authority
Robert St. John, Commissioner, Mississippi Arts Commission
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Mark Ely, Historic Preservation Planner, City of Hattiesburg
Larry A. Albert, Principal, Albert & Associates Architects