

Herman Roe Editorial Writing Award

Work together to preserve iconic treasure

By Chuck Frederick, Duluth News Tribune

The blasphemy was uttered by an elected official. Of course elected. Easy political points.

Except Duluth School Board member Alanna Oswald — like so many politicians, candidates and pot-stirrers before her — missed the mark by suggesting in March the Duluth school district consider ridding itself of Historic Old Central High School, a landmark as identifiable and iconic in Duluth as the Aerial Lift Bridge. Maybe even more so. The castlelike brownstone has been breathtakingly dominating our skyline since 1892. A bridge over the ship canal didn't go up until almost a decade and a half after that.

And now — what? Sell Old Central to an uncertain fate and private interests? Tear it down? Just because it needs some work? Of course it needs some work.

“Is it worth it?” Oswald asked as School Board members considered allocating funds for the sorts of repair projects that can be expected when you're entrusted as caretakers of an ancient building the community wants kept around and can't imagine being without.

Political points aside, Oswald surely also was well-intentioned and motivated by the same sense of fiscal responsibility that propelled her to office. And, in the end, she did do right by the old building. She voted with the rest of the board for another year of responsible repairs, all in accordance with a wellthought-out, detailed and sensible 10-year maintenance plan. She and the others also supported revisiting that plan on an annual basis, as constituents could expect and should appreciate.

As beloved as the building may be, and as much as making necessary repairs meets the School Board's and school district's public responsibility, we're still talking about some major money. Taxpayers' money. Our money. A total of \$18 million over the next 10 years in identified repairs.

While the district has talked about finding funds other than property tax dollars for Old Central's upkeep, actual efforts have paled.

And with experts on such resources so close by, too.

“We do have access to money that could help the district,” Duluth Heritage Preservation Commission President David Woodward said in an interview with News Tribune editorial board members. “We want to be partners. We have said, ‘You know we'll help you any way we can.’”

Because we have a heritage preservation commission, and for other reasons, Duluth is one of only a few cities in Minnesota eligible to receive certified local government grants from the National Park Service, according to Woodward.

“We can get hundreds of thousands of dollars from that,” he said.

The Duluth district also could access Minnesota Legacy funds for Old Central, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and also has been designated as a Local Landmark.

And it could tap into tax credits, Woodward said, much the way

the city of Duluth is doing to refurbish the NorShor Theatre. The district would have to partner with a private entity or developer who then would sell tax credits to raise funds before the building reverted back to public ownership.

A total of 40 percent of rehabilitation costs could be covered by local and federal tax credits, Woodward said. That'd total \$7.2 million of the \$18 million in repairs that have been identified as necessary at Old Central.

“That's an incentive” that would reduce taxpayers' burden, Woodward said.

As promising as those funding options may sound, to the frustration of Duluth school district taxpayers, the Heritage Preservation Commission and district officials have never sat down together to explore or pursue them. Both sides can accept responsibility for that failing. And both sides can take initiative now to begin working together. Both sides claim to be interested and can act immediately on that interest.

“I'm still learning about the sale of tax credits. We haven't done anything like that as part of my experience working with the district. So if it is something we're eligible for and we could learn more about that, I would expect we're going to pursue it,” Kerry Leider, the district's property and risk manager, told editorial board members in a separate interview. “I'm not actively pursuing it other than I've had a conversation with the Heritage Preservation Commission, asking them to provide the information about these opportunities. I think this plan out there right now and the community conversation that is starting to develop is going to put this maybe a little bit more on the fast track to try to get to the answers about those opportunities.”

The building-maintenance plan the School Board approved in March included nearly \$3.4 million a year for repair work at all of its properties. The \$3.4 million figure is the max the district can levy, based on its enrollment, according to state statute. In the district's budget, building-maintenance funds are separate from classroom-education funds.

Although most Duluthians would rather not broach the subject, as long as it has come up, if the school district ever did sell OldCentral, it'd still be protected by its federal and local historic designations. Before permits can be issued for any work, the building's owner — whether it's the district, some private entity or someone else — is required to come before the Duluth Heritage Preservation Commission and has to be awarded a certificate of appropriateness. The commission gets its authority from the 1966 Historic Preservation Act.

“We value our heritage,” Woodward said. “Not every building has to be saved, but (Old) Central does. ... It is iconic for that neighborhood. It is a monument to the 1890s focus on education that the early settlers had. It is aesthetically part of our hillside. (Losing) it would be almost akin to taking down the lift bridge.”

Making sure Duluth's treasured Old Central isn't lost can be assured with more communication between the school district, the School Board, Duluth's historic preservation community and others. If they started talking about funding opportunities and maintenance and working together, politicians, pot-stirrers and others would be less inclined to talk about selling or demolition. Unless, of course, they're just looking to win easy political points.