



PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

for greater philadelphia

For Immediate Release

Contact: John Andrew Gallery, 215-546-1146 x 1,
john@preservationalliance.com

Preservation Alliance Nominates Carnegie Branches to City's Register of Historic Places: Designation Would Protect Historic Buildings; Alliance Also Urges Further Study of Legal Issues

(December 22, 2008) -- The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia today submitted nominations for four historic branch libraries, scheduled for closing on December 31, to the Philadelphia Register of Historic Places. The four libraries, each constructed with grants from early-20th-century philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, are Holmesburg (built 1907), Haddington (1915), Logan (1918) and Kingsessing (1919).

“The Alliance would prefer to see the branches remain open while a system-wide examination of cost reductions is undertaken,” said John Andrew Gallery, the Alliance’s executive director. “But if the administration does carry through with its stated plans to close the libraries on December 31, the City has an obligation to insure that the properties are listed on the Philadelphia Register before declaring them surplus property and making them available for sale or lease.” Demolition or any alterations to the exteriors of the four buildings would be subject to approval by the Philadelphia Historical Commission as soon as the Commission staff officially accepts the Alliance’s nominations.

The Alliance also believes that there may be legal restrictions on the use of the sites that require further investigation. The Alliance urges Mayor Nutter to support the listing of the four branches on the Philadelphia Register and to review the legal issues more thoroughly.

“The decision to close these four libraries is premature without understanding the legal constraints associated with them,” said Gallery. “Closing the branches could precipitate a situation where these wonderful historic buildings are themselves threatened by vacancy, neglect and deterioration.”

The “public interest doctrine,” recently articulated in the Orphans’ Court decision regarding the sale of portions of Burholme Park, may apply equally well to the situation of the Carnegie libraries. It is possible the City may not have the right to close, sell or lease these four libraries without permission of the Orphans’ Court.

Moreover, the land for two of the libraries was provided by gifts to the City that also contain legal restrictions on the use of the sites and could result in an automatic reversion of publicly owned land to the heirs of the respective grantors.

The land on which the Holmesburg Branch was built was acquired by the City through a donation made by the Trustees of Lower Dublin Academy in a deed dated April 3, 1905.

The deed includes the condition that if the property ever ceases to be used as a library, it would revert to the Trustees. The 1912 deed conveying the land upon which the Haddington Branch was built to the City by a private donor has a similar condition.

Last week, the Alliance supported a proposal by the Friends of the Free Library to delay any action to close branch libraries until there is a system-wide examination of cost reductions to allow all branch libraries to remain open.

The Preservation Alliance for Greater Philadelphia actively promotes the appreciation, protection and revitalization of the Philadelphia region's historic buildings, communities and landscapes. To learn more, visit www.PreservationAlliance.com.

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1616 Walnut Street, Suite 1620, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103

Telephone: (215) 546-1146 Fax: (215) 546-1180 Email: info@preservationalliance.com
www.preservationalliance.com