



News Release

State of New Mexico

Historic Preservation Division, Department of Cultural Affairs

407 Galisteo Street, Suite 236
Santa Fe, New Mexico 87501

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 23, 2015

CONTACT:

Tom Drake, 505-827-4067

Abandoned Lordsburg High School is Historically Significant

Santa Fe — A grassroots effort in southwestern New Mexico to avert demolition of Lordsburg's early twentieth-century high school paid off when the state Cultural Properties Review Committee agreed the building was worthy of preservation at the national level.

The committee unanimously decided to forward a National Register of Historic Places nomination to the National Park Service for inclusion on the official U.S. list of properties that should be preserved. Although inclusion would not prevent the Lordsburg Municipal School District from demolishing the brick school once attended by former U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, it does draw attention to what still is one of Lordsburg's most significant buildings.

"This is the only building you have that is substantial and shows where you've been as a community," said Reginald Richey, an architect from Lincoln, N.M., and vice-chairman of the committee. "This is the best thing you've got."

Lordsburg Municipal School superintendent Randy Piper told the committee the district has wanted to tear down the building for seven years. He said the building is "a maintenance nightmare" that costs the small district \$12,500 a year in insurance premiums. That money, he said, would be better spent hiring additional teaching staff.

The school has been the focus of ten years of work by local citizens to raise awareness of its history and to save it. In 2007, the New Mexico Heritage Preservation Alliance included it on the nonprofit's Most Endangered List. The Hidalgo County Heritage Society, which commissioned the National Register listing, gathered signatures from 379 citizens and former students who want the building saved. In 2013, the school district gave permission to list the property in New Mexico's State Register of Cultural Properties.

If listed in the National Register, the building would be eligible for federal preservation tax credits, which have been used successfully to rehabilitate buildings in communities as large as Albuquerque and as small as Clayton, Silver City, Deming and Hobbs. Notably, Old Albuquerque High School, built ca. 1914, was shuttered for decades until it was repurposed for housing and helped spur revitalization of the area now known as EDO for East Downtown.

Built in 1916 as Lordsburg's first high school, it is significant architecturally for alterations completed in the Mission Revival style by the notable El Paso-based firm Trost & Trost Architects and Engineering in 1927. Henry C. Trost added two classroom wings and a two-story auditorium with a full stage and balcony that was used for performances, movie screenings, community events, a study hall and for staging New Deal programs during the Great Depression. The building was shuttered in the late 1970s.

The nomination also states the building is historic for education because it reflects a period of growth in Lordsburg during a mining boon that fueled optimism for the town's future and spurred a commitment to establishing a modern setting for education.

Sandra Day O'Connor attended classes at Lordsburg High School for one year when she grew homesick while attending a private school in El Paso, Texas, for her Lazy B Ranch near Duncan, Arizona. But tired of the long commute over rutted ranch roads to the border where she had to wait for a bus and resumed her schooling in El Paso the following year.

The building holds strong memories for many in the community as mentioned by Aida Saucedo Estrada who was one of four people from Lordsburg who attended the June 12 meeting. A graduate of Lordsburg High School, Ms. Estrada admitted she was sentimental about saving it but said it should be preserved so younger generations have a visual anchor to Lordsburg's past.

Mothballed for 30 years, the school remains one of the largest buildings in town. Its roof leaks and has collapsed in places, letting in water that has damaged plaster walls and hardwood floors on both stories.

The committee acknowledged the building was in "dire condition," as stated by member Matthew Bandy. In recommending it for the National Register, the CPRC said it was basing its decision on the importance of the building to Lordsburg's history.

The nomination was completed by historian John Murphey, a consultant, who also wrote the State Register nomination in 2013.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT:

Tom Drake, Public Relations
Historic Preservation Division, Department of Cultural Affairs
Bataan Memorial Building
407 Galisteo St., Suite 236
Santa Fe, NM 87501
(505) 827-4067
tom.drake@state.nm.us
www.nmhistoricpreservation.org