



February 5, 2014

Mayor Bates & Berkeley City Council
2180 Milvia Street
Berkeley, CA 94704

Re: Change in City Council meeting venue

Honorable Mayor & Councilmembers:

The Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association (BAHA) is deeply concerned about the City Council's consideration of moving its meetings from "Old" City Hall (aka Maudelle Shirek Building) to a West Campus site. This action is misguided for many reasons, including the following:

- it moves the most basic city government functions, the Mayor and Council, out of the city's heart;
- it ignores the important symbolic, historic, and touristic values represented by Old City Hall;
- it leaves the existing building to destruction by neglect;
- it ignores the opportunity for retrofit and effective reuse.

Berkeley City Hall; the Martin Luther King, Jr., Building; the Main Post Office; and the Berkeley High School campus constitute the heart of the city. This is where the Council belongs. The Berkeley Municipal Code dictates that the Council shall meet in City Hall, except in emergencies. Seismic hazards are not an emergency; they are the result of inaction.

"Old" City Hall is Berkeley's iconic symbol of identity. Historians, preservationists, urban planners, and tourist boards search for symbols to identify the essence of a built environment. Across the nation, city halls were deliberately intended to be symbols of place, their domes or cupolas rising above the surrounding buildings. In Berkeley, "Old" City Hall continues to be identified as the symbol of the city and remains a source of civic pride. Its cupola and spire are the city's equivalent to the university's Campanile.

When Berkeley's City Hall was completed in 1909, its cupola rose above the existing downtown and reflected Berkeley's growth from a town to a city. It is a significant early work by John Bakewell and Arthur Brown, Jr. who later designed San Francisco's City Hall (1912-1916) and Opera House (1932). The elegant Beaux Arts-style City Hall

served as the home of city government from 1909 to 1977, when city offices were moved across Civic Center Park into the Martin Luther King, Jr., Building.

Berkeley City Hall was designated on December 15, 1975 as one of Berkeley's first nine Landmarks. It is independently listed in the National Register of Historic Places and is also a significant contributor to the Civic Center Historic District, #81000142 in the National Register of Historic Places (added 1998).

It is widely known that unused and vacant buildings deteriorate quickly. The absence of daily use takes a mean toll on a building's infrastructure. It doesn't even need to be vandalized to deteriorate; but, of course, many vacant buildings do get vandalized, and the fact that they are unused means that routine maintenance is often skipped and repairs neglected. In fact, costs may rise because building systems failures and pest infestations may not be detected until serious damage has resulted.

If "Old" City Hall is vacated and "secured" (i.e., boarded up), this venerable Berkeley icon will end up being demolished by neglect. Outright demolition by Council order would be politically risky and cost Councilmembers good will and votes. In lieu of the wrecking ball, a politically safer approach appears to be allowing "Old" City Hall to face a slow and painful death. Rumors are also floating about ideas to privatize City Hall.

No studies have been conducted to determine how "Old" City Hall could be restored and its office spaces used for city functions that are now being held in rented spaces elsewhere. In 1991, "Old" City Hall was re-roofed with seismic strengthening and painted, and its cupola was restored. A 2002 bond measure, which included funds for retrofit, failed; but this measure also included a sizable addition to the rear and other unrelated items. As far as can be determined, no further engineering studies on the building's seismic safety have been completed and made public since 2002. Cost estimates for a seismic retrofit cited by city staff are not based on any construction documents, despite the Council's direction to staff on June 26, 2012 to complete such documents.¹

Instead of abandoning "Old" City Hall, the Council should seize the opportunity to strengthen its civic center, restore a beautiful historic building, and, it is hoped, hopefully, save some rental costs along the way.

Sincerely,



Susan D. Cerny
Corporate Secretary

John McBride
President

¹ Council vote: M/S/C (Bates/Worthington) to direct staff to complete necessary design and construction documents for upgrades to the Maudelle Shirek Building for continued use as the meeting location for the City Council, [...]