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UT football wins fight over historic building

Demolition permit granted despite status as State Antiquities Landmark

Kathy Armenta thought she'd have a chance to make her case.

But the demolition permit was granted before she even knew the University of Texas had requested it. By Wednesday, a chain-link fence with "construction site" signs encircled the old University Junior High, a 1930s brick building on the National Register of Historic Places and a newly minted State Antiquities Landmark, Texas' highest designation for historic sites.

Demolition crews prepped the tract. A black-and-yellow excavator parked near the steps tread decades ago by students attending one of Austin's first desegregated schools.

A large gray dumpster rested among the heritage oaks, massive trees that would outlive us all if not for UT deciding the land had greater potential as a state-of-the-art football practice facility.

"We're just kind of flabbergasted. We thought there would be more of a process," said Armenta, a retired UT professor who helped lead a grassroots effort over the past year and a half to save the historic schoolhouse from demolition. "But it didn't look like they had any intention of informing anybody."

UT spokesman Mike Rosen confirmed the site-clearing work has begun and is expected to continue "during the next several months." The new Longhorns football practice facility is expected to open in August 2026, replacing the use of Denius Fields, which had been deemed insufficient because players had to take a short bus ride to get there.

According to UT's demolition permit application, the new facility "will include indoor and outdoor practice fields, a three-lane sprint track, offensive and defensive lineman drill space, approximately 450 parking spots for student-athletes' use, as well as donor parking and hospitality space on Texas Football gamedays."

Earlier this year, those plans appeared to be in jeopardy. Preservation advocates caught the ear of the Texas Historical Commission board, which voted 11-2 on July 26 to designate the site a State Antiquities Landmark.

"You're going to raze a building down that does have some historical value, for *football*," commission board member Lilia Garcia told UT officials then. "I mean, the optics are not good for UT on this."

The landmark status didn't prohibit demolition, but it was supposed to make it harder. To get a demolition permit, UT would have to justify its plans to Texas Historical Commission staff.

Records show that happened swiftly, quietly and with no notice to those who had championed the landmark status.

UT requested the demolition permit Aug. 27. Joseph Bell, executive director of the Texas Historical Commission, granted the permit Sept. 17. Advocates didn't learn about it until a week later — and even then, only by chance, because Armenta's husband, Richard, had requested public records related to the site.

I asked Chris Florance, spokesman for the Texas Historical Commission, why the agency didn't give advocates the opportunity to provide input on the demolition permit request, given the

demonstrated community interest in this site. His response: The law doesn't require it.

"The Antiquities Code does not call for a hearing as part of the review process for a demolition permit application," he said.

Why didn't University Junior High's historical status matter?

That stark reversal — commissioners supporting protections for the site, only to have staff approve a demolition permit two months later — highlights a troubling fact.

"To understand that there's still a way for these buildings to be demolished, regardless of that support (from Texas Historical Commissioners), is really disheartening, because it shows a failure in our historic preservation law," said Edwin Bautista, the UT alum who initiated the landmark application for the site. "If that's the case, then what's the purpose of even having a Texas Historical Commission if they're not able to actually protect our valued historical properties around the state?"

Bautista, the Armentas and other advocates emailed Texas Historical Commission board members Thursday to ask: How could this happen?

When commissioners discussed the site in April and July, board Chairman John Nau III suggested UT might have to go through an administrative hearing process, but even that seemed unclear.

"This process has not been fully explained and sets a dangerous precedent," the preservation advocates wrote Thursday, adding, "Public universities and private owners can get administrative approval for a demolition (of historical landmarks) in three short weeks."

That's especially disconcerting when the site in question has sizable community support, as the old University Junior High does. The calls for preservation came from Austin's Historic Landmark Commission and other historical advocates; staff at the Mexican American Cultural Center and other cultural hubs; alumni of University Junior High; some graduates and former faculty members from the Steve Hicks School of Social Work, which most recently used the building; members of UT's Latino Studies and arts programs, who especially treasured the building's stunning stairwell mural by Raúl Valdez; and more than 2,100 people who had signed a petition.

None of that mattered when it came time to grant a demolition permit.

Losing a piece of Austin's past

UT has argued that renovating the old University Junior High building would be "cost prohibitive." A March 2015 study estimated such work would cost \$52 million, while UT's demolition permit application put today's potential cost closer to \$88 million.

Still, when you consider the recent renovation of Hogg Memorial Auditorium and the planned renovation of the UT Tower, it's clear the university can protect the buildings it values. The old University Junior High building, which predates all the athletic facilities that have cropped up around it, has the misfortune of sitting on land coveted by the most powerful program on campus.

Typically, an owner seeking to demolish a State Antiquities Landmark must show the building's deterioration "constitutes a threat to the health, safety, or welfare of citizens" and all alternatives have been exhausted. But the Antiquities Code "gives deference to institutions of higher

education to determine the appropriate course of action for buildings under their stewardship,” Bell wrote in his Sept. 17 letter granting UT’s demolition permit.

The permit requires UT to take some steps to honor the memory of the building it will dismantle, including creating a documentary, producing “360-degree walkthrough” imaging, and salvaging original light fixtures and the cast stone “University High School” emblem that has stood over the main entrance for 91 years.

Kathy Armenta felt a mix of shock and grief last week as crews started preparing the site for demolition.

“The anticipated loss of something that is so historical, so beautiful, so full of possibilities — it could have been repurposed and kept for the future,” she said wistfully.

But she took heart in the fact that so many people advocated for the site, and most of the state historical commissioners saw something worth saving. Armenta and several other advocates wore matching T-shirts to the July board meeting where preservation seemed possible, and nothing from the past two months has changed their message: “This building matters.” *Grumet is the Statesman’s Metro columnist. Her column, ATX in Context, contains her opinions. Share yours via email at bgrumet@statesman.com or on X at @bgrumet.*

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