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Pier St. building that now houses Port Senior Center chosen for honor that will help ensure its preservation

Port Washington's historic firehouse, which is currently home to the city's senior center, was named to the National Register of Historic Places last month.

"It is truly a significant building with its tower," said Port Washington Historical Society President Geri Zehren. "We're just glad to see the building recognized for what it is — a building of historic significance and beauty.

"It's an interesting building, and it needs to be preserved."

City officials concurred, with administrator Mark Grams saying, "We always considered it a historic site. I think it's one downtown building that's been very well maintained and is worthy of this honor. It's a unique building."

The Port Washington Fire Engine House at 102 E. Pier St. was designed by Milwaukee architect John Topzant and built in 1929 with tan brick walls, a Spanish tile roof, copper gutters and downspouts and the distinctive bell-tower-like hose drying tower.

Between 1929 and 1938, a matching addition was attached to the rear of the structure.

The distinctive Mediterranean Revival-style building served as the city's fire station until 1975, when it was converted to a senior center.

The building is one of only two in the city designed in the Mediterranean style, officials have noted.

The so-called engine house property, which is owned by the city, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places Nov. 5. It was added to the Wisconsin Register of Historic Places in April after being nominated by the Historical Society and the Port Washington Maritime Heritage Experience.

Placement on the National Register qualifies the property for grants and rehabilitation income tax credits, but does not prohibit modifications to it. The city can make structural alterations as long as a certificate of appropriateness is obtained, officials said.

If the city were to sell the building, it would be required to attach a preservation covenant to the structure. That covenant would require additional reviews be followed if renovations were to be made or the structure razed.

It's important to take steps to ensure historic buildings like the engine house, Zehren said.

"Port hasn't always been good about that," she said. "It calls for vigilance at all times."

As an example, she cited the former grist mill on South Milwaukee Street as an example of a historic building that was razed in recent years.

She also noted the efforts of Shirley Schanen Gruen and others to preserve the king post truss bridge at Fisherman's Park.

"Without them, would that bridge have been saved?" Zehren asked.

The Historical Society is in the process of raising the $500 needed to purchase a brass plaque for the structure denoting its entry on the National Register, Zehren said.

PORT WASHINGTON'S former firehouse, which is now home to its senior center, was recently named to the National Register of Historic Places. Photo by Bill Schanen IV