

School News

Hearing Set to Determine Historic Status of Greenbelt School Building

by Anna Bedford-Dillow

Greenbelt City Council hopes to see the Dora Kennedy French Immersion (DKFI) school building, which originally opened in 1938 as Greenbelt High, declared historic, says City Manager Josué Salmerón. That hope was buoyed on Tuesday with the publication of the staff recommendation to the county Historic Preservation Commission, which concluded the school met four of nine possible criteria of historical and cultural significance and recommends that Greenbelt High School and its approximately 12.6-acre environmental setting be designated a Prince George’s County Historic Site. A Historic Site Designation Hearing is scheduled to take place online on Tuesday, May 21 at 6:30 p.m.

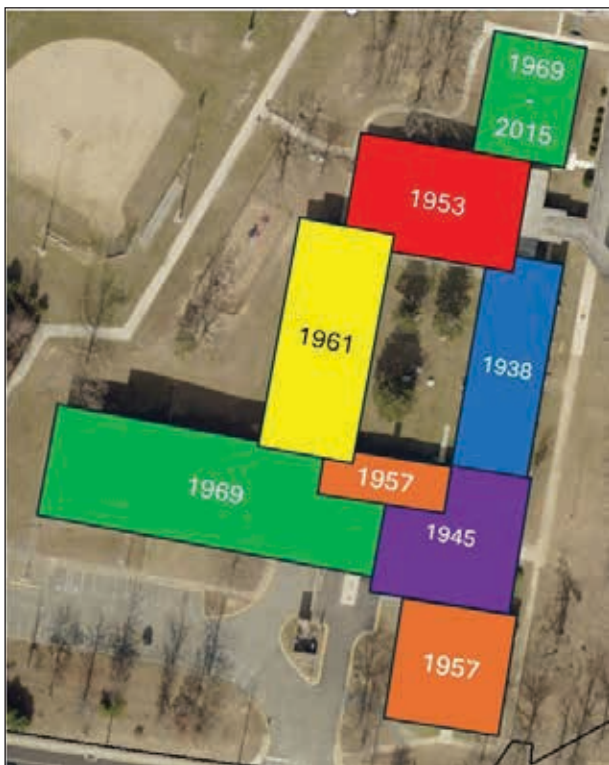
The staff report found that the site “has significant character, interest or value as part of the development, heritage or cultural characteristics of the County, State or Nation,” “exemplifies the cultural, economic, industrial, social, political or historical heritage of the County and its urban and rural communities,” “embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction,” and “represents an established and familiar visual feature of the neighborhood, community, or County due to its singular physical characteristics or landscape.” Staff concluded that despite alterations to the school, it has “sufficient integrity to convey, represent, or contain the values and qualities for which it is judged significant.”

Mayor Emmett Jordan wrote to Prince George’s County Historic Preservation Commission on behalf of Greenbelt City Council on April 11, requesting the site be assessed and classified as a historic site. The council’s request came in direct response to the Prince George’s County Public Schools (PGCPS) administrators’ statement that they planned to demolish it, Salmerón told the News Review. In the letter to the Commission Jordan notes that the site is “in danger of being lost” based on recent communications with PGCPS, which owns the building and the land. The plan was revealed at the January 10 worksession between PGCPS and council at which PGCPS shared their intention to move DKFI from the building in 2026, to house Springhill Lake Elementary there from 2026 to 2028 and then demolish it. “Council was alarmed,” said Salmerón. Councilmember Rodney Roberts was particularly vocal in his opposition to the plan. “You can’t tear down our old high school!” he objected at that meeting.

Since hearing council’s objections, PGCPS administrators have used the language of “decommissioning” and have refrained from publicly stating that they’ll demolish the building, which originally opened in 1938 as Greenbelt High. It later had several additions (the Historic Preservation Commission lists construction dates as 1937, 1945, 1953, 1957, 1961 and 1969) and became home to Greenbelt Junior High,



A photo of the 1938 building printed in the 1940 Greenbelt High School yearbook



This image shows the dates of construction for various parts of the building that now houses the Dora Kennedy French Immersion school.

then Greenbelt Middle School, and, for the last decade, DKFI. It was designated a County Historic Resource in 2013, the year between its occupation by Greenbelt Middle School and DKFI, when its future was then uncertain.

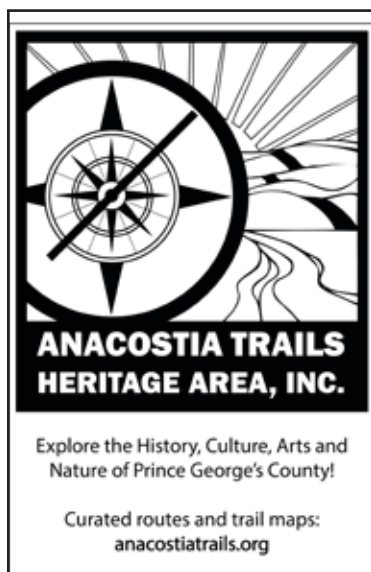
The staff report published on Tuesday stated that the “Art Moderne and International-style design emphasizes functionalism, siting, materials and economic constraints, all of which are characteristic of the architecture within the Greenbelt National Historic Landmark.” It notes Greenbelt’s significance as one of three federally built planned communities during the Great Depression, significance as a model for community planning and design and for its architecture. It “exemplifies several heritage themes identified in the 2010 Prince George’s County Approved Historic Sites and Districts Plan, including political history, education, suburban growth, and is a rare example of Art Moderne/International-style architecture within the Inventory of Historic Resources. It is also significant as an extant part of the Greenbelt National Historic Landmark,” it continues.

Greenbelt City Council wanted to explore options to protect the facility, Salmerón told the

News Review, but their discussions haven’t yet evolved to what they’d like to see become of the building in the long run.

Tuesday’s hearing will be held virtually. Access information can be found on the Historic Preservation Commission website at pgplanning.org/countywide-planning/historic-preservation. Anyone wishing to speak must fill out a sign-in form in advance, registering by 5 p.m. on the day of the meeting.

This reporter has two children who attend DKFI in the featured building.



Two ERHS Students to Compete In National History Day Finals

On Saturday, May 4, over 500 middle and high school students showcased their original documentary film, exhibit, performance, research paper or website – representing a year’s worth of historical research – in the Maryland History Day State Contest, held at University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

Two students who attend Eleanor Roosevelt High School (ERHS) won second place in their categories and will advance to the national level. Joshua Herrera-Guzman placed second in the Senior Individual Exhibit, on the topic of The Birthing of the First Socialist State. Aashi Moola placed in the Senior Paper category, on the topic of Mosquitos, Medicine and Major Milestones: William Gorgas’ Legacy on the Panama Canal. Both students’ sponsoring teacher is Victoria Patch Williams.

Maryland History Day, produced by Maryland Humanities since 1999, sparks critical think-

ing and helps develop skills in research and analysis, writing and public speaking. Working solo or in small groups, students create a project exploring a historical topic of their choice on an annual theme. This year’s theme is Turning Points in History. Maryland History Day is open to public, private, parochial and homeschool students in grades 6 through 12.

Students from nine Maryland counties and Baltimore City, including Herrera-Guzman and Moola from ERHS, will represent Maryland in the National History Day competition. They will compete among an estimated 3,000 participants from all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam, American Samoa and international schools in China, Korea and South Asia. National History Day runs from June 9 to 13 at the University of Maryland, College Park.

Information for this article was drawn from a press release from Maryland Humanities.



The Senior Dramatics Club on the Edmonston Road underpass, from the 1945 Greenbelt High School yearbook

- Photos courtesy Historic Preservation Commission



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