

# Agenda Report

June 2, 2025

**TO:** Honorable Mayor and City Council

**FROM:** Planning & Community Development Department

**SUBJECT: QUASI-JUDICIAL REVIEW FOR DESIGNATION OF THE ROOSEVELT SCHOOL BUILDING AT 315 N. PASADENA AVENUE AS A LANDMARK**

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

It is recommended that the City Council:

1. Find that, pursuant to the guidelines of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), Article 18 (Statutory Exemptions), §15270, CEQA does not apply to projects which a public agency rejects or disapproves;
2. Find that the Roosevelt School at 315 N. Pasadena Avenue does not meet any of the four Criteria for landmark designation pursuant to Pasadena Municipal Code (PMC) Section 17.62.040.D.2; and
3. Disapprove the application for landmark designation.

## **HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION:**

On April 15, 2025, at a Call for Review hearing, the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) recommended by a vote of 5-4 that the City Council approve the designation of the Roosevelt School at 315 N. Pasadena Avenue as a landmark under Criterion C of PMC Section 17.62.040.D.2 as an example of a Mid-Century Modern style educational facility.

## **BACKGROUND:**

A landmark designation application for the Roosevelt School was filed on February 7, 2024 by Rene Gonzalez, a Pasadena resident. The property is owned by the Pasadena Unified School District (PUSD). The five-acre property is located at the southern terminus of North Pasadena Avenue and contains multiple buildings (or additions) constructed between 1953 and 2014. The primary building under consideration for landmark designation was constructed in 1953 and is set back from the street behind a surface parking lot (Attachment A).

The school closed in 2019-2020 and PUSD has retained ownership of the property. PUSD does not support the landmark designation request. In order for the Roosevelt School to be eligible for landmark designation, it must meet one or more of the following criteria as required by PMC Section 17.62.040.D.2:

- A. It is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of the history of the City.
- B. It is associated with the lives of persons who are significant in the history of the City.
- C. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, architectural style, period or method of construction, or represents the work of an architect, designer, engineer, or builder whose work is of significance to the City or possesses artistic values of significance to the City.
- D. It has yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important locally in prehistory or history.

#### Original Application

Initially an application for landmark designation was submitted by Rene Gonzalez on February 7, 2024. The application included a report completed by PADRES (501c3) with the assistance of architectural historian Debi Howell-Ardila stating that the property was eligible for landmark designation under Criterion A as an example of an educational facility designed specifically for disabled children. The report submitted with the application did not find the property to be eligible under Criteria B, C or D. Staff reviewed the application and issued a determination on April 1, 2024, which found that the property was not eligible for landmark designation under any criteria. This was because the applicant did not provide sufficient evidence that the design and construction of the school buildings had a direct influence on or was associated with events that impacted schools constructed for students with disabilities and, therefore, did not make a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history. Staff also evaluated the property for potential historical significance under Criteria B, C and D and determined that it also did not qualify under any of those criteria.

A Call for Review of the staff decision was requested by Historic Preservation Commissioner Carol Potter and was heard by the HPC on July 16, 2024. A majority of the Commission agreed with staff's evaluation and found that the property was not eligible for landmark designation. As a result, the Commission voted not to call the staff determination for review.

#### Current Application Under Review

A second landmark designation application (Attachment B) was filed on September 10, 2024, by the same applicant with an updated report providing new information and stating that the Roosevelt School was eligible for landmark designation under Criterion C as an example of a Mid-Century Modern style flinger/cluster plan educational development. Pursuant to PMC Section 17.64.090.A, staff accepted the second application since it included new information and analysis under a different criterion than the original application. No new information was included in the



application for any other Criterion. As such, the current review is limited to Criterion C only.

Staff reviewed the second application and on November 8, 2024, staff issued a determination that found that the property was not eligible for landmark designation under Criterion C (Attachment C). This was primarily because of numerous alterations and additions that occurred since the 1953 construction that removed or otherwise modified character-defining features of the school's original design.

A Call for Review of the staff decision was requested by Historic Preservation Commissioner Juan de la Cruz and was heard by the HPC on April 15, 2025. A majority of the Commission found that the property meets the criteria for designation as a landmark under Criterion C. They found it to have distinctive characteristics of a Mid-Century Modern Style educational facility. As a result, the Commission voted 5–4 to overturn the staff determination and recommend that the City Council approve the designation of the property as a landmark under Criterion C (see Attachment D for the HPC staff report).

#### Roosevelt School Overview

The Roosevelt School was first established at the current location in 1907 and housed a general elementary school. By 1929, the school had grown to become a school for mentally handicapped children and by 1930, physically handicapped children were admitted as well. The school's original building was extensively damaged in the 1933 Long Beach Earthquake and subsequently demolished. The Roosevelt School was reconstructed in 1953 after the passing of a bond measure for Pasadena schools and continued to provide educational services for children with special needs.

The original building on the current campus was designed by Keith Marston and Eugene Weston, Jr. It originally consisted of three buildings: the Main Wing (east), South Wing, and Center Wing, separated by covered, open-air walkways and integrated, programmed open spaces. Numerous building alterations and additions have occurred since the school's original construction. In 1972-1973, a large infill addition was constructed that connected the previously separated rear buildings of the original school into a single building. Additional school buildings were constructed elsewhere on the campus in 2006-2007 and 2014. The construction of the 210/134 freeway interchange in the late 1960s/early 1970s also altered the shape of the site and disconnected the school from its original neighborhood context.

#### Architecture Overview: Mid-Century Modern Style

Staff evaluated the architecture of the property according to the registration requirements outlined in the Los Angeles Unified School District Historic Context Statement (LAUSD HCS), since the City does not currently have a context statement specific to the history and development of educational facilities. Since staff's review of the application, a draft Citywide Historic Context Statement (HCS) has been released for public review and comment. While still in draft form, it does provide additional

framework for evaluating school properties in Pasadena for historical significance and additional information is provided in this report that further supports the staff conclusion.

The LAUSD HCS outlines features indicative of the Mid-Century Modern style. The Roosevelt School originally incorporated a number of these including one-story massing, brick veneer exterior, long axial classroom wings with a roughly L-shaped footprint, little applied ornament, generous expanses of glazing, low pitched or flat roof forms, and wide eaves and cantilevered canopies supported by pipe columns. It also originally exhibited character-defining features of the modern, functionalist school plant property type, including single-loaded classrooms arranged in finger-like wings arranged along a central axis, classrooms opening directly onto patios/play areas, a unified and nonhierarchical site plan, unified campus design of buildings and landscaped courtyards, patios and terraces adjacent to classroom wings, and outdoor corridors.

The draft Pasadena HCS discusses institutional development trends in the City and provides evaluation guidelines and integrity considerations for properties that fall under the theme of Public and Private Education. The draft HCS indicates that the development of public education in Pasadena followed national trends overall and outlines guidelines and considerations for public education facilities to qualify for designation. The draft report states, “A public school building or campus that is significant under this theme may be eligible... as a post-World War II school reflecting the expansion and growth of the school district after the war.” It goes on to state that “Most post-World War II public educational facilities reflect the Mid-Century Modern design and planning concepts, which emphasizes horizontal features and clustered plans with integrated open space and walkways, primarily in “finger” formations and layouts.” The 1953 construction of the Roosevelt School was originally based on a finger/cluster plan and Mid-Century Modern design features.

#### Architects Overview: Keith Marston & Eugene Weston, Jr.:

Per the American Institute of Architects (AIA) Historical Directory, Keith Marston was born in Pasadena in 1914 and obtained a degree from the University of Southern California in 1936. He worked for Marston & Maybury (a partnership between his father, Sylvanus Marston and Edgar Maybury) from 1936 to 1941 and then worked as an associate to his father, Sylvanus Marston, from 1941 to 1946 after which he formed his own firm. Works associated with Keith Marston include La Canada Junior High School (1951), Roosevelt School (1953) in Pasadena, and Madison Elementary School (1953) and John Marshall Junior High School (1955), both in Pomona. The AIA Historical Directory did not provide information regarding Eugene Weston, Jr. beyond his office location at 963 W. Colorado Boulevard in Los Angeles.

#### **ANALYSIS:**

The Roosevelt School is nominated for designation as a landmark under Criterion C of PMC Section 17.62.040.D.2, which states:

*[The property] embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, architectural style, period, or method of construction, or represents the work of an architect, designer,*



*engineer, or builder whose work is of significance to the City or possesses artistic values of significance to the City.*

PMC Section 17.62.040.A also requires the landmark designation criteria to be applied “according to applicable National Register of Historic Places Bulletins for evaluating historic properties, including the seven aspects of integrity: location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association (National Register of Historic Places Bulletin #15: “How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation”).”

According to the NPS, “distinctive characteristics” are the physical features or traits that commonly recur in individual types, periods, or methods of construction. To be eligible, a property should contain enough of those characteristics to be considered a true representative of a particular type, period, or method of construction.

Further, the draft Pasadena HCS identifies a high threshold for a property in the City to be eligible for its architectural or design merit. Eligible properties should be excellent examples of the style or type, reflect the “distinctive characteristics” of the style, and retain a high degree of integrity.

#### Integrity of Design and Setting

As previously stated, the original buildings exhibit many of the identified character-defining features of a Mid-Century Modern Style public school building. However, the character-defining features of the modern, functionalist school plant have been substantially altered such that the building no longer retains sufficient integrity to qualify for landmark designation.

The 1972-1973 addition expanded the Center Wing to the west and to the south, joining it to the South Wing. This addition interrupted the original finger/cluster-plan arrangement of buildings, eliminated features of the building facades that were enclosed within the addition and removed an original outdoor courtyard between the two original wings and to which the wings were originally oriented with direct outdoor access to them from the classrooms in the wings. This is in direct conflict with one of the integrity considerations outlined in the LAUSD HCS, which states, “School expansion and new construction over the years, in particular in the postwar period, might have resulted in the addition of in-fill buildings and structures in areas that were originally designed open spaces. Such new additions should not interfere with or serve as a visual impairment to the designed connections between buildings, in particular classroom wings, and adjacent outdoor patios and spaces.”

Further, a comparison of the existing drawings provided in the applicant’s report and the existing conditions observed during a staff site visit on October 3, 2024 indicate that the following alterations have occurred at date(s) unknown:

- Replacement of the original primary entry at the east façade of the Main Wing, including removal of the glass entry doors, sidelights and transoms and installation of new solid tile cladding and solid doors;
- Removal of metal louvered sun-shades along the canopy edges throughout;

- Enclosure of the west opening of the Main Wing;
- Enclosure of the open breezeways between the South and Center Wings and Main (east) Wing; and
- Installation of drop ceilings on the interior, visible from the exterior and interfering with window functionality.

As such, the existing condition of the building, while largely intact on the primary east and south façades, no longer reflects the original configuration and openness of the finger/cluster plan that is a character-defining feature of schools from this period. In addition, the other architectural features removed or infilled since its original construction has further added to the loss of integrity of the distinctive features of the Mid-Century Modern style, which generally includes limited or minimal ornamentation and extensive indoor-outdoor connectivity, both physical and visual. The building now reads and functions as a single, internally focused building rather than a cluster of three separate buildings with extensive, direct connections to the outdoor spaces and circulation corridors that define the style (Attachment E).

#### Staff Conclusion

Staff analysis finds that the Roosevelt School has undergone significant changes since its construction which have resulted in loss of original character-defining features and loss of its original configuration and, therefore, does not retain critical aspects of integrity of design or setting and, as such, it is not eligible for landmark designation under Criterion C. The alterations to the buildings also significantly diminish the Roosevelt School as an excellent example of the Mid-Century Modern Style. Further, there is no evidence that the architects of the building, Eugene Weston, Jr. and Keith Marston, developed a body of work that would be considered significant to the history of the City.

#### **COUNCIL POLICY CONSIDERATION:**

Pasadena has a long history in promoting and preserving historic resources. Eligible landmark designation applications are consistent with the General Plan Land Use Element – Guiding Principle 2: “Pasadena’s historic resources will be preserved. Citywide, new development will be in harmony with and enhance Pasadena’s unique character and sense of place. New construction that could affect the integrity of historic resources will be compatible with, and differentiated from, the existing resource.”

However, the Roosevelt School has been significantly altered and no longer retains integrity to qualify for landmark designation. Eligible properties should be excellent examples of the particular style or type with a high degree of integrity.

#### **ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS:**

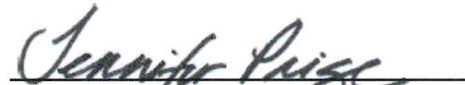
Per the guidelines of CEQA, Article 18 (Statutory Exemptions), Section 15270, CEQA does not apply to projects which a public agency rejects or disapproves. Therefore, no analysis is necessary.



**FISCAL IMPACT:**

In some instances, owners of designated historic properties may apply to the City for a Historic Property Contract (Mills Act), which allows an alternative and often lower property tax assessment. However, since PUSD owns the property for educational purposes, property taxes are not collected. Therefore, there is no fiscal impact.

Respectfully submitted,



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Attachments (6):

- A. Roosevelt School Site Plan
- B. Second Landmark Designation Application and Supplemental Report (including Vicinity Map and Current Photographs)
- C. November 8, 2024 Eligibility Letter
- D. Historic Preservation Commission Staff Report (dated April 15, 2025, without attachments)
- E. Staff Summary of Alterations to Buildings
- F. Effects of Historic Designation