



March 28, 2024

Boulder City Council
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Boulder, CO 80302
By Email

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RE: Support for Designating a "Civic Area Historic District"

Dear Members of the City Council:

The Olmsted Network wholeheartedly supports designation of the Civic Area Historic District. Such designation would provide due acknowledgment of the inspired work of Frederick Law Olmsted Jr. and others in creating the city's historic core.

The proposed Historic District offers unique insight into town leaders' visionary early planning, desire for open space, and commitment to exceptional public design. Boulder's City Improvement Association, a group of committed volunteers, realized that Boulder was transitioning from a mining town to a residential community – and they wanted to ensure both beauty and utility in the town design.

As with many other cities at that time, Boulder sought out the most famous landscape architecture firm of the day, Olmsted Brothers, specifically requesting Frederick Law Olmsted Jr., the son and namesake of the profession's founder.

Olmsted Jr. birthed the field of urban planning, making Boulder one of the early beneficiaries of his planning vision. Commissioned in 1907 by the Improvement Association, Olmsted Jr. immediately recognized the genius of the place, then a town of barely 10,000 people. He created a master plan which included a linear greenway along Boulder Creek, including Central Park and the civic center. He also proposed the locations for North Boulder Park and Martinez Park, and the preservation of the mountain backdrop.

Biographer Elizabeth Hope Cushing singles out Olmsted Jr.'s work in Boulder. She notes Olmsted's painstaking research of the terrain (including scrambling in the bush and bicycling around town), his meetings with local officials and business people and his lecture at the university about landscapes and parks. From this work, Olmsted developed ambitious plans for Boulder that would make it a livable city and accommodate people from all economic levels.

In the 1910 report, Olmsted focused on defining "physical improvements within the reach of the city [that] will help make it increasingly convenient, agreeable and generally satisfactory as a place in which to live and work." He set out streets, waterways, parks and quasi-public buildings and singled out Boulder Creek as an especially fine natural amenity and one that offered design opportunities, including flood control.

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With Central Park in mind, he urged “keeping the main part of the ground as simple open common ... over which the wonderful views of the foothills can be obtained at their best from shaded paths and roads along the embankment edge – this would give a piece of recreation ground worth a great deal to the people.” To this day, the open common embodies the Olmstedian ideal of a “democratic space” that brings people of all backgrounds together in community.

Olmsted emphasized the future potential of Boulder parks to provide citizens – not just the rich and powerful – access to the “precious commodities, air and sunlight, and that subtle promoter of health and cheerfulness, the sense of spaciousness and freedom.” His design of Central Park and the Civic Area embodied those worthy goals.

Like many Olmsted-designed parks, Central Park today includes a later enhancement made by another designer, Denver planner, Saco DeBoer. Both Olmsted’s and DeBoer’s designs planned for flood control, an appreciation of the Boulder Creek riparian environment, opportunities for healthy recreation, and cultural offerings that benefit all citizens.

While changes have occurred over time, the integrity of the Olmsted design is clear. By designating the Civic Area Historic District, the Council can honor the visionary work and planning of Boulder leaders and help protect and preserve the beautiful and useful open space designed by Olmsted Jr. over a century ago.

The Civic Area has served as the “heart” of the Boulder community and a setting for memorable events. Today, the park and the five city-owned buildings tell an almost continuous story of Boulder’s evolution. This important part of downtown Boulder is worthy of local historic recognition and we strongly support its designation.

Thank you for protecting and honoring Boulder’s historic built environment.

Sincerely,



President & CEO

The Olmsted Network is dedicated to championing Olmsted parks, places and principles through advocacy, education and stewardship. We foster and support park conservancies, friends’ groups and citizen volunteers to protect and preserve these special places. Our Network includes Central Park Conservancy, Biltmore, Washington Park (Milwaukee), Prospect Park Alliance, Bok Tower Gardens, the Midway Plaisance Park Advisory Council and Louisville’s Olmsted parks. For more information, go to www.olmsted.org.

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