

September 4, 2020

Sarah Hanson  
Executive Director  
City of Birchwood Village

Tobin Lay  
City Administrator  
City of Birchwood Village

Re: Review of Milestone for National Register property evaluation for Birchwood Village Hall, 207 Birchwood Avenue, Birchwood, Washington County, Minnesota

Hello Ms. Hanson and Mr. Lay:

The Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) has completed review of the Milestone for the National Register property evaluation for the Birchwood Village Hall in Birchwood, Washington County. Although this is an interesting property, we have concerns with regard to the building and the analysis in the study.

At present, the SHPO is not convinced that the Birchwood Village Hall is eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. Our reasons are offered below.

### **Historic Integrity**

As you know, the National Register requires that a property must have both historic significance and historic integrity in order to be eligible for listing in the National Register. The historic integrity for the Birchwood Village Hall is troubling, especially for a Criterion C argument for architecture. The fact that the building is entirely enveloped in non-original siding substantially undermines its integrity. Moreover, the profile of the non-original siding does not match that of the original. While it may be argued that the original siding is still in place under the current siding, the National Register requires that the character-defining features of the property be clearly evident. In other words, we must see those elements that are supposed to make the property historically significant.

Additionally, the village hall has a non-original, non-contributing addition at its rear. More, several window openings and windows are no longer extant, altering the original fenestration pattern. While discussion of the interior is limited, the photos appear to reveal an interior that has seen much change, from a dropped ceiling to carpeted floor to non-original doors in places.

The study places much weight on the massing of the building, as well as the fact that the building still has its original siding, albeit concealed. In fact, the study notes that along with its massing “the building’s most notable feature is architect Magnus Jemne’s unconventional use of half-round log vertical siding.” Again, however, we must be able to see this important feature of the building to understand why the building is supposed to be significant. The massing is not enough to convince our office that this is a distinctive example of Moderne architecture.

## **The Study**

The study contained a limited amount of information and analysis. For example, although the study notes other Moderne buildings in Minnesota that are in the National Register, there is no comparison/contrast with these buildings or even other similar buildings not in the National Register. It is the comparison/contrast with other like properties that allow us to make distinction between properties, that allow us to determine what is unique. Yes, the Birchwood Village Hall may be Moderne, but that in and of itself is not historically significant.

Lastly, we were surprised that the study did not arrive at a clear period of significance for the property. It is expected that all properties have a period of significance, but none was offered here.

## **Conclusion**

Regrettably, the SHPO does not believe that the Birchwood Village Hall is eligible for listing in the National Register as the building now exists. If the non-original siding were removed to reveal the original siding, and if original window openings were once again revealed, that would improve historic integrity, providing a stronger sense of the architecture the building is supposed to represent. That action, coupled with deeper research and analysis as to why the building is supposed to be a distinctive example of Moderne style, may lead to a different conclusion on the eligibility of the village hall.

You are certainly welcome to send an updated draft, and we will review it, but it will be challenging to overcome these issues. Alternatively, you can re-upload this draft to Fluxx as the 'final' and close out the grant. In any event, the SHPO 'Approves' the grant Milestone.

Whichever course is chosen, if you have questions, please let us know.

Sincerely,



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