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High school 'historical?'

By Nadine Wandzilak / Staff Writer

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Building may be added to list of significant sites, if Feb. 25 vote fails

When it opened, the building was modern. Designed by a quartet of architects, Willard Adden, Winthrop Parker and Robert Clinch, all Reading residents, and fellow architect Crimp, the building features metal-framed glass block windows, new at the time, designed to let in more light. Its profile is horizontal, hugging its site, with a vertical tower that identifies it, according to Virginia Adams, as a public building.

The Historical Commission met last month with Russ Graham, chairman of the School Building Committee, on the committee's recommended plan for Reading Memorial High school. The plan calls for the 1950s wing of the school, which faces Oakland Avenue, to be demolished. The project architect said the state School Building Assistance Program wants to know if the building is an historic landmark, Graham told the commission.

Commission members said they want the community to be aware of the history of the building.

Reading High School was the first new high school in the state built after World War II, according to Historical Commission member Roberta Sullivan. It was intended as a memorial to war veterans, she said.

Stylistically, the same architects who designed the 1950s wing also designed Town Hall and the former town library, Sullivan said, now an annex to Town Hall, as well as the former high school on Sanborn Street. The design of the current high school is much different from those Georgian Revival-style buildings, according to commission member Virginia Adams. At the time, the community went along, she said, with the then-new design style.

The 50s wing of what was then Reading High School opened in September, 1954, according to the "At Wood End" town history. The school's name was changed to Reading Memorial High School in June, 1957, the book states, "in memory of students and graduates who died defending their country during World War II and the Korean War."

In meeting with the public on plans for the high school, Graham said few people have bonded to either the aesthetic or the historical aspects of the high school.

That "bonding" to a building doesn't happen in 50 years, said commission chairman Clayton Jones. Even if

there is no groundswell to preserve the building, the commission needs to consider that option, he said.

Much of the high school is inefficient, educationally, Graham told the commission. Further, all high school mechanical systems have exceeded their life expectancy, he said. The building committee chose the high school renovation option based, Graham said, on educational issues and phasing, having space for students during construction.

Why, several commission members asked, is the newer, more problematic wing of the high school being retained instead of the structurally sound front building? The newer building is more adaptable to renovation, with a better location, nearer to the fieldhouse, Graham said.

Some schools in the community, such as the former Highland School on Middlesex Avenue, now the public library, are more than 100 years old, Adams noted.

Commission members discussed putting the 1950s high school building on the commission's inventory of significant buildings if voters reject the high school renovation plan. They plan to take no action on the issue, they said, until their March meeting.

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