

Class of '55 fights for Frieze Building

Fourth Ward neighbors also oppose U-M plan

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The paint is peeling on the Frieze Building. The windows are fogged with age. The floors inside are simply a mess. The heating and cooling infrastructure is archaic.

But for members of the Class of 1955, the last to graduate from the building when it was the Ann Arbor High School, the faults are cosmetic. The building's exterior is as visually striking as ever and still fundamentally sound, they believe. It's worth saving, they say, as a link to the city's past, and the source of good bit of nostalgia, too.

"It's one of the only remaining old, historic buildings in and around Ann Arbor," said George Kempf, a member of the Class of 1955. "Yes, there are others, but we're looking at that one. We want to see it kept, and preserved."

Now, those class members are making common cause with neighborhood activists and historic preservationists to pressure the University of Michigan to spare Frieze from the wrecking ball. About six weeks ago, U-M announced its intention to demolish the building, located on State Street between Huron and Washington streets.

In its place, U-M wants to build a 500-bed residence hall with a significant amount of academic space. U-M President Mary Sue Coleman said the project will provide an impressive new gateway to the northwest corner of campus.

But the Frieze supporters are organizing. They've agreed to turn up the heat on U-M by writing letters and making telephone calls to

the Board of Regents. There's talk of trying to ask U-M alumni to withhold donations to the university, which is in the midst of a major capital campaign. Still, they don't want to appear confrontational; they also plan to suggest architects who specialize in adapting old buildings to new uses.

The plans were hashed out by about 30 people at a meeting Thursday night. Supporters also spoke at the regents meeting Thursday afternoon. "It's a good start," said Louisa Pieper, a preservationist.

It may be an uphill battle, though. U-M says it's just too expensive to reuse the Frieze Building. And the university does not need city approvals for the project.

Henry Baier, U-M's associate vice president for facilities and operations, said it's possible to rehabilitate the building, but too expensive. It wouldn't be a fiscally responsible project, he said. U-M has renovated older facilities, such as the Perry Building, also a former school. But that project was not on the same scale.

"We have this mismatch, really, between the high school that was constructed in the early 1900s," Baier said, "and the opportunity to create a contemporary learning environment that our students expect from their Michigan experience."

Len Coleman, Class of '55, has contacted several members of his class to organize their 50th reunion in July, and they have sent a letter to U-M. Anybody who graduated from the former Ann Arbor High School wouldn't want to see the Frieze Building demolished,

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