

**Minnesota Now (MPR) | Minnesota Now Residents rally to save old Homer town hall building**  
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INTERVIEWER: You know, old buildings can carry a lot of meaning for many people. That's why a group in Homer Township near Winona are organizing to save their old town hall building. It's a tidy, brown bricks structure that used to be the little town's school. The township board put out a request for bids in a local newspaper for a new building where they can meet.

And it raised alarms for our next guest, who sent the notice around to friends and co-published a letter to the editor calling for the old building to remain in place. Jeanne Nelson is a retired schoolteacher who lives in Homer. She's with us right now. Welcome to the program. I appreciate your time.

**JEANNE** Good afternoon, Cathy. Thank you for having me.

**NELSON:**

**INTERVIEWER:** How did you hear about this plan to tear down the old town hall?

**JEANNE** Well, it all started one day while I was looking at our Winona Post paper, which is a free paper delivered to us weekly. And I see an ad in the paper. It was requesting bids for a new building to be built. And this was-- the ad was placed by the Homer Township board.

And until then, we had no idea that their plan was to tear down our Maybury architecturally-designed building and replace it with a new metal shed.

**INTERVIEWER:** A metal shed?

**JEANNE** So it was all a surprise.

**NELSON:**

**INTERVIEWER:** Ah, I see, so--

**JEANNE** Yeah, that's how it is described.

**NELSON:**

**INTERVIEWER:** A metal shed, OK. So now for folks who have not been to Homer-- I mean, it is a pretty small place-- can you describe this little brick building?

**JEANNE** Well, the brick building was designed in about 1900 or thereabouts by Maybury and Sons Architectural Firm.

**NELSON:** Maybury is a common name in Winona history and in southeastern Minnesota. Maybury designed in the Richardsonian style the Winona courthouse, Winona County Courthouse, which we did work to save several decades ago. Maybury was hired by the federal government to design the Winona Post Office, which until 1963, stood standing proudly. But then it was torn down and replaced with the post office building which we have today, which is basically just a rectangular box. Maybury designed homes for the Mayo brothers in Rochester and so forth.

So it is a designed building that has a particular architectural style and is made of wonderful materials-- hardened brick, travertine limestone window sills, a wonderful limestone foundation. It's a one-- it has a basement, and it's a one-story building that was originally built for grades 1 through 9 but then later it was used for grades 1 through 6.

**INTERVIEWER:** You know, I've had a chance to do some history--

**JEANNE** In 19--

**NELSON:**

**INTERVIEWER:** Go ahead.

**JEANNE** Yes, well, in 1970 then, the school was closed, and the children were absorbed into the Winona Public School  
**NELSON:** district. And at that time, the building was sold to the township board for \$1 for use as a town hall. And so it's been used since then for voting and for meetings.

**INTERVIEWER:** As I was going to say, I've done some history along Highway 61 in your area, and Homer is tucked right along the river, and the old highway goes through it. And that building looks like it's in pretty good shape. Any idea as to why the town board might want to get rid of it?

**JEANNE** Yes, there were a dozen or more of us that attended the first meeting, and then the second annual meeting we  
**NELSON:** also attended. But at the first meeting, we talked about what was your motivation for wanting to get rid of this building? Because in 2016, we had the same conversation and at that time told the board that we did not want to lose this building.

Well, they told us that the building needs to become more readily handicap-accessible, which we agree. They also said that it needs air conditioning. We agree. They said that it needs updating with the windows and so forth, that it needs tuckpointing. It's made of hardened brick. And, of course, sooner or later in the course of 120 years, it's going to need that kind of repair.

They also said that there wasn't enough room when voting time came. They said we needed to stay six feet apart and that it's just too crowded during voting time. And the board had decided that it just needed to be torn down and replaced with this actually [AUDIO OUT] be bolted to a concrete slab. That's about how they are done. And it would have just the usual windows and doors. It won't be any bigger than what we currently have as far as the actual meeting and voting space. So this is what we thought, well, if it's going to be the same size and you're saying this one is already too small, we really question that.

**INTERVIEWER:** So the brick building makes way possibly for like a poll building of some kind. I'm wondering, is this little brick building protected by any historic landmark designation?

**JEANNE** No, it is not. Now we do have-- the interesting thing about Homer, and it has the most wonderful history, Cathy.  
**NELSON:** I've been looking through a box of clippings from the Winona Daily News, the Winona Republican Herald from 1950s and earlier. We have the Bunnell House, which is on the Historical Society-- and that's right across the street from this brick building, school building, that we're talking about-- and the Homer Methodist Church, which also was originally-- the one that we see today was constructed in 1904. And it has been maintained by all of us who go to this little community church. The Bunnell House is owned by the Winona County Historical Society.

So we really have a triad of three very important historical buildings in this community, and we feel that this is an important element in a community that used to be what has the most wonderful history. For people to really start to look at the clippings that I saw in this old box, I can't tell you how wonderful it is.

**INTERVIEWER:** Is it possible, Ms. Nelson, that there could be some interest in getting a historic registered designation for this town hall, or is it too late for that? I hear the train behind you. [CHUCKLES]

**JEANNE NELSON:** Yes! I'm sitting here on the banks of this beautiful Mississippi River with bald eagles and trains. And Homer itself is just the most wonderfully historic-- I'm looking at a picture of Minneapolis schoolchildren coming to visit the otter farm at Homer, Minnesota. You probably wouldn't believe that. But as far as the history goes here, the otter farm with Emil Liers in 1957 tourist season had 10,000 visitors. I couldn't believe it.

Now you ask, do we have interest in restoring or placing that building on the historical register? Right now we feel that the better way for us to go is to do all of the maintenance and refurbishing and updating that the community deems necessary and just go in that route without placing it on the historical [AUDIO OUT]. That's our current thinking.

**INTERVIEWER:** I have about a minute and a half left. I know the next township board meeting is the second Monday in April. Do you-- what's your feel here? Do you think you'll be able to save this building?

**JEANNE NELSON:** We shall endeavor as hard as we can to do that. We have a very committed group of people. We put out-- Homer residents have not attended recent town hall meetings. You need to know that. And we realize that we haven't.

We have some problems here with communication with our town board. We do not have a site on the internet for our township to publicize when the board meetings are or the agendas or anything else.

And so we did come together. We had a gathering of close to 60 people at our little civic center here in Homer. And we have a petition being established. We have money that people have just simply donated. Please, please work on this. Save this building. We recognize it for what it is as a historical treasure. And so we plan to go to the next town board meeting and hope to develop a plan where there is time to do the saving. Do the planning. Do what we need to do to save this building.

**INTERVIEWER:** All right, Ms. Nelson, thank you so much for joining us. Best of luck.

**JEANNE NELSON:** Yes, thank you so very much for inviting me, Cathy.

**INTERVIEWER:** Jeanne Nelson lives in Homer Township. She's organizing to preserve the old town hall and schoolhouse building there. Now we should tell you we left messages with the Township board but were not able to reach them before this interview.