

Preliminary Plan for the Starin Park Water Tower

Landmarks Commission and the Starin Park Water Tower Committee

May, 2025

Introduction

Whitewater's City Manager, John Weidl, and the Whitewater Common Council have tasked the Landmarks Commission to make recommendations regarding the short- and long-term preservation of the Starin Park Water Tower. The chairman of the Landmarks Commission felt that it was vital to receive input from the community and therefore formed the Starin Park Water Tower Committee (the "Committee"). Individuals who represent various interests to include tourism, business, historic preservation, city government, former and present council members, and civic advocates were invited to serve on the Committee along with the members of the Landmarks Commission. The Committee began its work by reviewing the Report completed by McEnroe Consulting Engineers ("McEnroe") on the structural analysis of the water tower submitted to the City of Whitewater in January 2023 (the "Report"). The Report concluded:

"The structure is safe in its current condition (emphasis added). The only concern at this time is the potential for stone falling, and the fence around the perimeter is effective at keeping the public away from the [structure]."

"We see no reason to consider demolition at this time. The masonry and steel structure is in need of maintenance and repair work to keep it in good condition for the long term."

McEnroe provided two estimates. It estimated that demolishing the structure would cost \$600,000, and it estimated that a total cosmetic restoration of the tower would cost \$1,000,000.

The Committee believes that the Starin Park Water Tower is an important piece of Whitewater history, legend, and lore; is an attraction that enhances Starin Park and the city; and is an asset to tourism. The Committee believes that the water tower can be promoted as a historic site and that, if desired, a plan could be formed to monetize this resource. Even if such a plan were not forthcoming immediately, demolition of the structure would deny future Whitewater citizens an opportunity to pursue this option. At the same time, because the tower is safe in its current condition, it can serve its function as a valuable and productive historic site without undergoing a total cosmetic restoration. Consequently, a total cosmetic restoration is not only prohibitively expensive but unnecessary.

Therefore, the Starin Park Water Tower Committee recommends a third course: a stabilization effort of strategic and essential repairs that would enhance the stability of the structure for the long term, with particular focus on the tower's steel tank. To this end, the Committee has developed the following preliminary recommendations for the Starin Park Water Tower.

Recommendation #1:

The Committee recommends that the Starin Park Water Tower NOT be demolished.

The Committee believes that McEnroe's structural analysis of the water tower was thorough and professional and resulted in clear findings. Three years have passed since the structural analysis was done, and there has been no structural failure since that time, supporting the conclusion that "we see no reason to consider demolition at this time."

The Committee feels that even if the following recommendations are not followed for repair work, the tower should not be demolished, as the Report was clear that the structure is not a hazard as long as the fence is maintained to protect the public.

Recommendation #2:

The Committee recommends that the City of Whitewater allocate the \$600,000 demolition cost to a fund for strategic or essential repairs to stabilize the tower for the long term.

The Committee understands that the City has allocated \$600,000 for the possible demolition of the water tower. The Committee, however, feels that the best course of action is to use this \$600,000 instead for repair work that can extend the preservation of the tower as a historic landmark that would continue to be kept safe for the public. A full restoration of the type that the McEnroe Report suggested is a worthy goal, but given the fact that it would be difficult to raise an additional \$400,000 to \$500,000 in the near future, the Committee recommends the alternative of stabilization repairs instead. The McEnroe Report suggests that the most important stabilization work needed would be (1) masonry and mortar joint repair and (2) repair to any corroding steel tank elements. The Committee would like to explore how the City may perform this stabilization within a \$600,000 budget, but for the Committee to be able to do so, the City would need to approve the following recommendations.

Recommendation #3:

The Committee recommends that the City of Whitewater briefly delay the submission of a finalized report from the Landmarks Commission, allowing the Commission to gather critical information to formulate specific plans related to recommendation #2.

Since the McEnroe Report was analysis was done over three years ago, the Committee feels that the City should re-engage McEnroe to update the Report, specifically to perform an internal examination of the tank and its supports, which McEnroe was not able to do at that time. However, the Commission will not be able to receive this update in time to be able to submit to the Council the specific plans the Council has requested by May 2025.

Recommendation #4:

The Committee recommends that the City of Whitewater request an estimate from McEnroe Consulting Engineers for the cost of an update of its Report, in which update McEnroe will (a) investigate the current state of the tower and its tank and (b) develop a plan for essential repairs, costing not more than \$600,000, that would provide long-term stabilization of the tower.

The Committee would ask McEnroe, perhaps in consultation with a restoration company, to complete the following:

An analysis of what strategic or essential repairs could be performed for not more than \$600,000 that would result in long-term added stability to the water tower, preventing potential structural failures and stone shedding, with special attention to maintaining the integrity of the tank and its supports. A list of such repairs in order of priority, together with an estimated cost for each.
New recommendations for a maintenance fund.

Recommendation #5:

The Committee recommends that the City support the formation of a private organization, such as “Friends of the Water Tower,” that would be able to fund-raise for current repairs to the tower and/or create a fund for future maintenance. If such an organization can be successfully formed, the Committee recommends that the City work with that private organization regarding activities related to the tower.

The Committee encourages the formation of a private, non-profit organization for the purposes of fund-raising and creating a plan to preserve the tower long term. Such a group could raise funds both for immediate work on the tower and for future maintenance costs. This fund-raising effort would go beyond Whitewater by engaging former students and alumni at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, who have a “fondness” for the water tower, in a fund-raising campaign. Likewise, reaching out to fans of paranormal legends and lore, who also have an interest in the water tower, could be successful. The water tower is already a key location on the Chamber of Commerce annual Spirit Tour, and this new organization could build on this community connection with such activities as sale of tower-branded merchandise, sponsorship of public events located at the water tower (such as a 5K foot race beginning and ending at the tower or, more specifically, a Halloween-related 5K race in which participants are encouraged to run in costume), or partnerships with other community events such as the annual Shock Wave Haunts put on by the Fuzzy Pig.

Recommendation #6:

The Committee recommends that the Water Tower be listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

While there are, unfortunately, few programs offering brick-and-mortar funding for preservation projects, there may be other programs available to help in preserving the water tower that are contingent upon its being listed in the National Register. The National Register also provides prestige to a historic property that will be useful in fund-raising for its preservation.

*Attached you will find photos from the McEnroe report that indicate the corrosion that affects the metal tank on the water tower.