PRESS RELEASE

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Courthouse Committee Calls for Investigation

Fate of Historic Landmark Requires Full Disclosure of Facts

Dateline: Rock Island, IL — The Courthouse Revitalization Committee (CRVC) is renewing its call for the Rock Island County Board (Board) to suspend demolition activities, gather accurate information, and earnestly engage with citizen preservationists before spending in excess of $674,000 to demolish the Historic Rock Island Courthouse. It is anticipated this cost will increase due to inflation that has occurred since 2018 when the contracts were signed. Brent Ganahl, Rock Island County Public Building Commission (PBC) Chairman, has stated "*The intent of the Public Building Commission is to honor the contracts already in place. The Commission will ask awarded contractors for change orders reflecting the price increases incurred due to the delay and move forward accordingly.*" The magnitude of the demolition cost increase is unknown at the present time.

CRVC research of public records and information obtained through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests has revealed inaccurate information was presented to the Board at key junctures of its decision-making process. This research has also revealed a small group of elected and appointed officials have sought to circumvent local, state, and federal regulations governing Historic Preservation. Additionally, they ignored input of Rock Island County citizens and unilaterally determined the valuable, irreplaceable Historic Landmark would be demolished.

1. **Examples of inaccurate information presented to the Board at key junctures:**

- 2/16/2016: During this Bond Issue Notification and PBC Public Hearing, Sheriff Bustos made a presentation to the Board providing an overview of the Sheriff's office failure to maintain the Historic Courthouse. The Sheriff's presentation included:
    - A slide indicating "Cracks in the Courthouse terrazzo floors are a "Structural Issue"." When in fact, KJWW, a local engineering firm had provided the County a report stating: "*There are some cracks in the terrazzo floor topping, but in our opinion these are only a cosmetic imperfection and not structural.*"

- A slide indicating "Exterior concrete heaving in many places, chunks break off and fall." When in fact, the Historic Courthouse is constructed of Bedford Limestone and NOT concrete. There is a distinct difference between a concrete structure which is degraded to the point it is disintegrating (as indicated by Sheriff Bustos) and a masonry structure which requires routine tuckpointing.

- 2/19/2019: This Board meeting occurred after a lawsuit had been filed to halt demolition of the Historic Courthouse, Sheriff Bustos again misled the Board stating "concrete chunks will regularly fall from the building because the expansion and contraction of the material…" (See comments above regarding actual courthouse construction) The Sheriff's remarks at this meeting included the statement *"it is dangerous and has no future*." summarizing his official position opinion to demolish the Historic Courthouse.

- 3/10/2021: During this Committee of the Whole meeting, the proposal to allow the GSA to convert the Historic Courthouse to a federal courthouse was discussed. Board Member Kai Swanson, who is an influential voice, made several misleading statements, such as, "…the southern side was about to sink into the soil". This statement is, in fact, unfounded. The Committee has found no study or engineering report exists that supports Mr. Swanson supposition.

2. Example of elected and appointed officials acting to circumvent Historic Preservation, ignoring citizen input, and unilaterally determining the Historic Courthouse will be demolished:

- 7/18/2017: During a Public Hearing, numerous citizens knowledgeably spoke in favor of preservation and adaptive reuse of the Historic Courthouse. Board Chairman Maranda subsequently stated "…*Thank you everybody for the attendance. You definitely brought the message and it gives us something in the next year or two to…as a new one goes up, there will be a lot more talk and discussion. So, when we get to committees, we will definitely heed everything that we've heard tonight*…" This statement seemed to bode well for citizen input. Unfortunately, other elected and appointed officials did not embrace the promise to heed public input made by Chairman Maranda. It is important to note Judge Walter Braud was in attendance and spoke at this Public Hearing.

- 8/10/2017: 23 days after the 7/18 Public Hearing, the PBC met. Judge Braud and PBC members discussed the Historic Courthouse during this meeting, as recorded in the following minutes excerpt, which was obtained by FOIA:

"Also Attorney Stengel called about the status of the Courthouse. The Preservation Committee is going to approach the Rock Island City Council about making it a Historical Site. Kavensky stated the City would have the final word on that. *Judge Braud said that the key is to try to stop it now so we would not get into a informational meeting.* The building is not in good shape and the dome is gone and Kavensky says that it does not qualify. Wendt made a motion to instruct Attorney Stengel to represent as and try to prevent this. Second by Kavensky." (Italics added)

- 8/16/2017: 29 days after the 7/18 Public Hearing, Attorney Stengel attended the City of Rock Island Preservation Commission meeting at the direction of the PBC and Judge Braud. The minutes contain the following record of the discussion regarding the Historic Courthouse:

"ROCK ISLAND COUNTY COURTHOUSE BUILDING Berger said that representatives from Rock Island County had come to speak regarding the potential designation of the Rock Island County Courthouse as a Landmark. Bill Stengel, an attorney representing the County Building Commission, said that the County wanted the Landmark designation process to move slowly. **The County intends to demolish the Courthouse** and would like to discuss with the Commission the possibility of turning the site into a park containing historic monuments. **The existing building, Stengel said, would pose a security threat in the opinion of the County Sheriff when it can no longer be secured by the County. It could not be repurposed when it is eventually vacated as a result. St**engel said that a site plan would be made available to the Commission as soon as possible. The Commission had no questions for Stengel or the other representatives present." (Bold added)

The above timeline reveals Judge Braud, Sheriff Bustos, and the PBC had already unilaterally decided to demolish the Historic Courthouse by 8/17/2017, nearly a year before the Board acted to authorize demolition on 7/18/2018. It also reveals this group of officials had no interest in heeding public input or the Historic Courthouse's landmark status.

3. Lawsuits, Appellate Court Ruling, Consultation and Memorandum of Agreement

The disposition of the Historic Courthouse has journeyed through a complex and lengthy web of lawsuits and court proceedings, the details of which are beyond the scope of this press release. Throughout this journey, RICO maintained the Illinois State Agency Historic Resources Preservation Act (Preservation Act) did not apply to the Historic Courthouse. In July 2020, the Third District Appellate Court ruled the Preservation Act does apply to the Historic Courthouse. This ruling resulted in a consultation with the Illinois State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO).

Unfortunately, no Public Hearings were held during this consultation and the details of the consultation are not available to RICO citizens. CRVC FOIAs to-date have not yielded a complete understanding of RICOs representations nor SHPOs responses during the consultation. This consultation ultimately yielded a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) which when completed to the satisfaction of SHPO, would allow RICO to demolish the Historic Courthouse. To-date FOIAs appear to indicate stipulation IV of the MOA is not being followed.

4. CRVC Call for Action and Investigation

The Historic Courthouse is an irreplaceable valuable historic landmark and its demolition is close at hand. Dozens of RICO citizens have appeared before the Board over the past five years calling for preservation and adaptive reuse of the Historic Courthouse. This public input has essentially fallen on deaf ears, which has created increased distrust of RICO officials. A number of concerned RICO citizens suspect conflicts of interest may exist among RICO officials. Full disclosure is needed to help restore trust among RICO citizens.

The CRVC call upon each Board member to familiarize themselves with the history of the pending demolition of the Historic Courthouse. Many of the current Board members were not seated when previous discussions and decisions occurred. CRVC members have initiated outreach to State and Federal officials and agencies for assistance in addressing the mishandling and imminent destruction of this Historic Landmark.

No evidence exists that the Historic Courthouse is a danger to the public, a security threat, or structurally unsound as stated by those officials who have acted unilaterally to promote its demolition. The Historic Courthouse is a valuable irreplaceable historic landmark. Like thousands of RICO citizens, CRVC members believe Courthouse preservation and adaptive reuse will bring outside dollars into our community and result in a revitalized Historic Landmark which will be a source of pride to RICO citizens for generations to come.

CRVC members will attend the Board's 9/20/22 meeting and reiterate the action requests presented at the Board's 8/16/22 meeting:

- Suspend Demolition Activities
- Work with stakeholders to engage a qualified un-biased licensed engineering firm to assess the structural integrity of the courthouse and provide a written report
- Actively engage with voters, stakeholders and interested parties to fully explore adaptive re-use