

Soldier Field status slipping

U.S. panel favors crossing stadium off landmark list

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A federal advisory committee voted Thursday to strip Soldier Field of its National Historic Landmark status, agreeing with architectural analysts that the flying-saucer shaped stadium wedged between the field's columns destroyed its historic character.

Should Soldier Field lose its landmark status?

- Yes
 No

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The unanimous recommendation of the National Park System Advisory Board's Landmarks Committee now goes to U.S. Interior Secretary Gayle Norton, who will make the final decision on Soldier Field's landmark status.

Norton's decision is expected by the end of the year, said Carol Ahlgren, architectural historian for the Midwest regional office of the National Park Service.

"We disagree with the National Park Service decision to withdraw the historic landmark status," said Michele Jones, spokeswoman for the Chicago Park District, which owns Soldier Field. "We feel like we went to great lengths to preserve the structure's historic character--the exterior including the colonnades, which is what got us the landmark designation in the first place."

But David Bahlman, president of the non-profit Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois, which tried unsuccessfully through litigation to prevent construction of the new stadium, said the new structure "obliterated the views and sight lines" of the stadium's horseshoe exterior and colonnades.

Bahlman heralded the federal committee's recommendation.

"I think it's a terribly appropriate action for them to take, and the whole National Historic Landmark program would be seen as a sham if they hadn't done the de-designation," he said. "From our point of view, they didn't have any choice."

If the stadium loses its landmark status, neither the city nor the Chicago Bears, which paid for much of the \$660 million renovation completed in September 2003, would lose any funding; and Soldier Field would not lose any protective status, as the designation does not prevent it from being altered.

But the stadium would lose the prestige of being one of fewer than 3,000 properties across the nation with landmark status. And, if the original recommendation of the Park Service's architectural analysts is followed, it also will be removed from the National Register of Historic Places, which lists about 78,000 properties. Thursday's recommendation does not address that issue, Jones said.

The recommendation, made in July by architectural historians at the Park Service, concluded Soldier Field "no longer retains its historic integrity. ... The futuristic new stadium bowl is visually incompatible with the classical colonnades and the perimeter wall of the historic stadium."

Those conclusions echoed longtime critics of the new stadium.

Ahlgren, who helped draft the report recommending removal of landmark status, said other structures have lost such status for similar reasons, although most removed from that list have been "destroyed or demolished."

"It's unfortunate we had to take this step. But the heightened awareness of what it takes to become a National Historic Landmark is positive," she said, noting the unusual level of publicity about Soldier Field's status. "This is not something we do lightly."

Soldier Field, named in honor of World War I veterans, opened in 1924. Opposition to altering it was fierce in 2001, when the city's Plan Commission held hearings on the renovation proposal, months after Mayor Richard Daley announced the plan and the General Assembly quickly approved a deal to pay for it.

Calls to Daley's press office for comment on Thursday's recommendation were not immediately returned.

The Landmarks Preservation Council and the Friends of the Parks organization had filed lawsuits, arguing, in part, that the renovation would ruin the field's historic character. One of their lawsuits went to the Illinois Supreme Court, but the groups lost.

"This was to be expected," Friends of the Parks President Erma Tranter said of the committee's recommendation. "That was one of our arguments in the legal case, and it was just affirmed."

Although there's been much criticism of the renovation in Chicago, New York Times architecture critic Herbert Muschamp wrote that the renovation should be viewed "as a model for cities that are looking toward architecture to strengthen their identities as contemporary cultural centers."