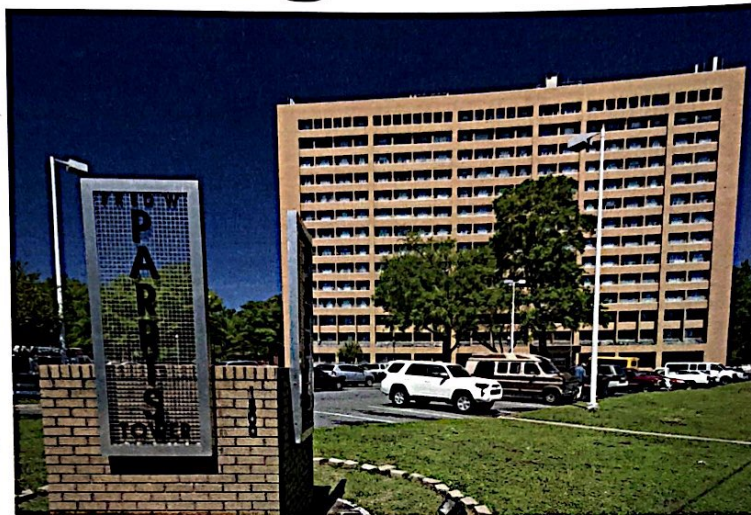


# National Register Listings Light a Towering Inferno

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Fred W. Parris Towers at 1800 S. Broadway, top; Jesse Powell Towers at 1010 Wolfe St., bottom left; and Cumberland Towers, 211 E. 8th St., are officially historic places (PHOTOS BY JASON BURT)

in 1975, by which time the federal policy had changed.

Proponents of the towers' national register inclusion argued that the buildings are historically significant as local examples of the federal public housing initiative. That significance compensated for the buildings being less than 50 years old, which is an unofficial cutoff age for register applicants.

The three towers represent nearly 600 residential units, and the Housing Authority plans a \$55 million renovation project for the buildings. Because the buildings are for low-income seniors and disabled people, it's unlikely rent payments will make up the costs.

That's why the tax credits become such an important factor in the buildings' renovations, for which the Housing Authority plans to partner with Gorman & Co. Inc. of Oregon, Wisconsin. It is expected that as much as \$11 million of the \$55 million cost could be reimbursed through various state and federal tax credits.

Jill Judy, who owns Little Rock Historical Properties with her husband, said she was approached about buying Parris Towers, but that idea disappeared when the Housing Authority decided to

put the complex on the national register. Judy said she and her husband live near Parris Towers and own property near Cumberland Towers.

"That went away all of a sudden when they decided to put it on the historical register," Judy said. "Then it became a good enough building to rehab."

Judy expressed concern that the towers' renovation tax credits will result in less money being available for other preservation projects. State law was recently adjusted to allow for \$400,000 in state credit per project with an annual cap of \$4 million; the three towers would conceivably receive \$1.2 million in annual credits.

"You don't make money running these things," Judy said. "You make money totally on the front end when you do the construction and get your tax credits back."

## 'Absolutely Entitled'

Patricia Blick said Judy's concerns about tax credit allotment are a bit overblown because the state's \$4 million cap has been reached only once since 2009. Blick was the deputy director of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program

when the towers were first put up for register listing.

The staff of the AHPP, a division of the Department of Arkansas Heritage, analyzed the nomination and ultimately decided to reject the towers as a suitable register listing. Hurst, an appointee of Gov. Asa Hutchinson, decided to submit the towers to the state review board for a vote, where they were again rejected.

Blick left the AHPP in mid-January to become executive director of the Quapaw Quarter Association. Director Molly McSwain also retired in January, but Blick said her departure had nothing to do with any disagreements with Hurst. (Blick is the subject of this week's Executive Q&A on Page 22.)

She said there was nothing untoward about Hurst's and the Housing Authority's persistence in pushing the nomination up the food chain after each rejection.

"They are absolutely entitled to take it to the actual state review board," Blick said. "Basically, Stacy, as the state's historic preservation officer, is authorized to still put forth a nomination to the keeper of the national register. I would say, too, to be fair, you or I could nominate a property and we could do the same."

"The people who wanted to pursue this pursued all their avenues. They were entitled to that and they did it."

Blick said that while the Park Service generally defers to the state's judgment in historic decisions, it is not a rubber stamp. Judy and Welch-Blair, however, are upset because the national review happened so quickly without any publicity about the towers being up for a decision.

Blick had the same confusion when she heard the towers had been approved in March. She reached out to Jim Gabbart, who reviews Arkansas submissions for the Park Service.

Gabbart, who was unavailable for comment, told Blick in an email that Hurst's nomination of the towers happened days before President Donald Trump's inauguration. The incoming administration then ordered a freeze on register notices on Jan. 20, after the proposal's 45-day calendar had started but before it had been publicized on a list of pending items.

After 45 days, nominations are automatically listed unless the Keeper of the National Register vetoes the nomination. Gabbart said the towers proposal was reviewed by a public housing expert, who found the nomination satisfactory.

Blick said there probably wouldn't have been much disagreement about the towers' inclusion if they had been more than 50 years old. She said that even though the buildings aren't pretty — Judy called them "ugly eyesores" and Welch-Blair referred to a "concrete monstrosity" — there is more to history than beauty.

"It was unexpected how everything unfolded," Blick said. "We were kind of surprised too, to be perfectly honest. I don't think it was underhanded." ■

## \$55 Million Renovation

The towers were erected in response to a federal policy that gave funding priority to senior public housing projects. Little Rock responded by building Parris in 1972, Cumberland in 1974 and Powell