## **National Register Listings Light a Towering Inferno**

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Some downtown Little Rock property owners are surprised and upset that three public housing towers have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places despite being rejected by the state's review board.

The Fred W. Parris Towers, the Cumberland Towers and the Jesse Powell Towers were built in the early 1970s to provide affordable housing for senior citizens. The Metropolitan Housing Authority of Little Rock, which owns all three buildings, requested the towers be placed on the national register; their inclusions would allow the MHA to receive up to \$11 million in state and federal tax credits for renovations of historic buildings.

Consulting Group of Heritage Portland, Oregon, which specializes in obtaining historic status for developments, made a presentation on the Housing Authority's behalf at the State Review Board of the Arkansas Historic Preservation Program meeting on Dec. 7 in Little Rock. The board voted 4-2 to exclude the towers from the national register.

Stacy Hurst, the director of the Department of Arkansas Heritage, then directly nominated the towers to the National Park Service on Jan. 17. The Department of Arkansas Heritage announced the towers had made the national register list on March 25.

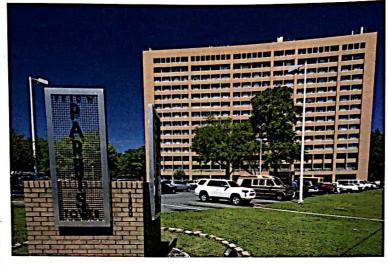
The announcement stunned the proposal's opponents, who had not known Hurst had directly applied for the towers' register inclusion at the federal level.

"I personally think heads need to roll over this," said Sharon Welch-Blair, who spoke against the proposal at the review board meeting. She is a past president of Little Rock's Downtown Neighborhood Association. "We need to stand up. The problem we have right now is citizens aren't standing up on principle. This is a money-grubbing issue that doesn't have anything to do with historic properties. This has to do with who can make money.

When Hurst's office was contacted for a comment on her support for register status for the towers, Communications Director Melissa Whitfield responded by emailing a copy of the nomination letter Hurst sent to the National Park Service.

## \$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







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

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

## '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 avenue They were entitled to that and they did

Blick said that while the Park Service generally defers to the state's judgment in historic decisions, it is not a rubberstamp. 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."