

County of Santa Clara
Department of Planning and Development
Planning Office



HHC01 110905

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Reviewed by: Michael Lopez
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DATE: November 9, 2005

TO: Historical Heritage Commission

FROM:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Lopez".

Michael Lopez
Interim Planning Director

SUBJECT: Nomination of the Bracewell Observatory to the California Register of Historical Resources.

RECOMMENDED ACTION

Receive and file the nomination of the Bracewell Observatory to the California Register of Historical Resources.

REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION

The nomination of the five (5) 60-foot dish antennas (Bracewell Observatory) located at Stanford University was submitted by a private party, Bob Lash, M.D., representing the Friends of the Bracewell Observatory Association (Attachments 1 and 2).

State procedures for nominating a resource to the California Register of Historical Resources requires that the applicant send a copy of the nomination by certified mail to the clerk of the local government in whose jurisdiction the property is located. The local government is given 90 days to comment on the application before it may be sent to the State Office of Historic Preservation (OHP) for review; however, comment is not required. OHP staff recently advised Historical Heritage Commission (HHC) staff that it is not unusual for local governments to decline to comment.

On a separate but related track, Stanford University has applied for a permit to demolish the five (5) 60-foot dish antennas. In consultation with County Counsel, it has been determined that issuance of this permit is a ministerial action and the permit can be issued as long as the applicant meets building code standards. While the HHC may choose to comment on the nomination of the Bracewell Observatory to the California Register of Historical Resources, comment is not required. Given the unusual circumstances and timing of these issues, staff recommends the HHC receive and file the application without comment.

BACKGROUND

Nomination of the Bracewell Observatory to the California Register of Historical Resources

The nomination of the Bracewell Observatory to the California Register of Historical Resources was placed on the October 20, 2005 Historical Heritage Commission (HHC) agenda by the Clerk of the Board in order to comply with the 90-day comment period. However, the nomination was received by the Office of the Clerk of the Board on September 27, 2005 and there was insufficient time for staff to provide an informed response and recommendation to the HHC. Therefore, the HHC voted to defer and reschedule the item for review at a special meeting on November 9, 2005. While the item was deferred on October 20, 2005, public comment was received from Charles Carter, Director of the Stanford University Land Use and Environmental Planning Office (Attachment 3.)

In order to be eligible for listing in the California Register, an historical resource must be significant at the local, state or national level, under one (1) or more of the following four (4) criteria:

1. It is associated with events that have made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of local or regional history, or the cultural heritage of California or the United States; or
2. It is associated with the lives of persons important to local, California, or national history; or
3. It embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, region, or method of construction, or represents the work of a master, or possesses high artistic values; or
4. It has yielded, or has the potential to yield, information important to the prehistory or history of the local area, California, or the nation.

In addition, historical resources must retain enough of their historic character or appearance ("integrity") to be recognizable as historical resources and to convey the reasons for their significance.

Construction on the Bracewell Observatory site (Site 515) began in 1955 with the installation of 32 ten-foot dish antennas mounted on concrete piers. The project was funded by the Air Force Office of Scientific Research, and construction was carried out from 1955 to 1959. The subject 60-foot dish antennas were designed and built from 1966 through 1972 by the Stanford Radio Astronomy Institute. The original 32 ten-foot dishes were dismantled and removed after 1973, and only the five (5) 60-foot dish antennas remain.

Application by Stanford University for Demolition Permit

On a separate but related track, Stanford University submitted an application to demolish the five (5) 60-foot dish antennas in August 2005. When the Department of Planning and Development received the demolition permit application, it requested additional information from Stanford University to determine whether the structures have potential historic significance. In response to the request, Stanford University raised the question whether the County has the regulatory authority to evaluate the historic significance of these structures. Santa Clara County Code Section C1-91 requires review by the HHC and the Board of Supervisors of all demolition permits for resources listed in the Heritage Resource Inventory; the dish antennas are not listed in the Santa Clara County Heritage Resource Inventory and the HHC does not have a role with regard to the demolition permit. The Stanford University Historic Values Subcommittee, a subcommittee of the University Committee on Land and Building Development charged with advising and making recommendations to the Committee on Land and Building Development, reviewed the subject dish antennas on October 6, 2005. The Stanford Land Use and Environmental Planning Office reported that the group did not

conclude that the site warranted formal evaluation and gave it no "Cumulative Evaluation Index" rating (Attachment 4.)

In consultation with County Counsel, the Department of Planning and Development has concluded that, in this particular circumstance, approval/denial of the demolition permit is a ministerial action; as long as the applicant meets building code standards, the County does not have other grounds to deny this application. Stanford University has advised it will not seek release of the demolition permit until after the November 9, 2005 HHC meeting. In addition, staff will recommend that Stanford University wait to demolish the structures until after an eligibility determination regarding the listing of the Bracewell Observatory in the California Register of Historical Resources has been made by State Office of Historic Preservation staff and the State Historical Resources Commission.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment 1: Cover Letter for Nomination of the Bracewell Observatory to the California Register
- Attachment 2: Department of Parks and Recreation Primary Record and Building, Structure and Object Record (DPR 523 forms)
- Attachment 3: Comments Presented to the HHC on October 20, 2005 by Charles Carter (Stanford University)
- Attachment 4: Historic Values Subcommittee Information