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Historic designation for former York Theater building in D.C. denied

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By Hamil R. Harris, Published: November 29

The D.C. Historic Preservation Board on Thursday voted down a request to grant historic status to a former movie theater in Northwest that now serves as a church.

The panel voted 5 to 3 against granting the designation to the building at Quebec Place and Georgia Avenue that was once the York Theater, saying the age of a building is not reason enough to give it historic status.

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Constructed in 1919, the York was one of the city's premier venues for silent movies. Fisherman of Men Church took over the building 25 years ago. In March, the Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A, which serves the neighborhoods of Parkview, Pleasant Plains and the northern half of Columbia Heights, applied for historic designation for the building.

Church members opposed the move and argued that the building has no historic value. On Thursday, a majority of the board agreed with the church, with some reservations.

"The decision had nothing to do with it being used as a church, but whether the building had the significance and integrity to be a historic landmark in the city," said board chairwoman Catherine V. Buell, who added that the 5 to 3 decision shows that there needs to be a larger dialogue on the growing tension between church leaders and community groups on the issue.

Bishop Clarence Groover Sr., pastor of the church, applauded the board's ruling. The church's plans to renovate had been placed

on hold until the board could decide if the structure merited a historic landmark.

"The decision is really a thrill," Groover said as he left the hearing with a busload of members. "We didn't have permits for what we had planned. Now we can get the permits to build the canopy, signage and give the church a presence in the community."

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Kent Boese, the secretary of Advisory Neighborhood Commission 1A who led the push for historic designation, left the hearing without comment.

Buell said it is important that the commission, city planners and church leaders talk about issues that come up during designation hearings. "We need to keep these organizations involved," she said. "They are active stewards in the city, and we need to find a forum to have a dialogue."