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Testimony to the Long Range Planning Subcommittee on HB 777
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Montana Preservation Alliance is the statewide nonprofit organization fostering the preservation of our historic places and cultural heritage. At MPA, we work with owners of historic properties across the state, both public and private, to seek ways to preserve heritage places whenever possible. We have carried out this mission for the past 18 years, and have a solid track record of identifying alternatives for buildings at risk due to abandonment, lack of funds, lack of options or lack of vision.

The task of breathing new life into a historic building isn't always easy, and takes commitment of funds, expertise and energy. When done well, it's worth it – handsome old buildings gain a new lease on life, our heritage remains intact, and it leaves us with a valuable asset.

Throughout Montana, we have many state-owned properties, including many landmark buildings in desperate need of rescue. The short list includes the Montana Veteran's Home at Columbia Falls, some of the university buildings, the Stedman Foundry Pattern House here in Helena, the Warm Springs complex and the Boulder River School administration building. A couple of these have the dubious honor of making our Most Endangered List in recent years, and I would like to share this list with you. As you can see the list is full of buildings that we should all hope to see rejuvenated. These buildings are beautiful and they are the storehouses of our history.

In our work, we reach out to every corner of our state, and I can tell you that across Montana, people have gotten the concept that rehabilitating heritage buildings not only preserves history, it's a good investment. And a proven tool for revitalizing local economies, which in turn creates jobs, new investment and a threshold of activity that leads to more dollars being spent locally.

We see this working from Tiny Ingomar where the local schoolhouse is now the Bunk & Biscuit Inn to Red Lodge's Hawkeye grain elevator now an office building, to Fort Benton, Big Timber, Red Lodge and Billings where restoration of historic hotels and depots have sparked tremendous investment and turned their downtowns around.

Timing of this bill was prompted by the proposal to tear down the historic Boulder River School headquarters building, unused by the MT Developmental Center and going to ruin for over 2 decades now. Today the roof is leaking and the pigeons have taken over. Rather than use state funds to demolish the building HB5 has been amended to support stabilization of the property, and we are conferring with the Jefferson County local development agency to get this building back in use. They are highly interested and we will help them, as we stepped in at the Red Bluff Stage Stop where another state-owned building sat vacant and unused until we brought the university and the local community together to discuss how to save it. The result? Phase one: Weatherproof the Building. Accomplished several months later, with materials supplied by MSU, donated labor by Bradford Roofing of Billings. Phase two: Secure its Future. People from the workshop donated over \$1,000 as seed money into a Red Bluff building fund, and MSU is considering options including sale of the building to the community or new owner.

The state itself could take a more entrepreneurial approach. Were the state to embrace the potential of these buildings as economic incubators or research centers we might see more historically-housed programs such as the National Center for Appropriate Technology in Butte, or the National Health Institutes' Rocky Mountain Lab in Hamilton. Imagine the Boulder River School as a center for addiction research or a telecommunications business institute.

HB 777 gives you, the legislature, the chance to take a leadership role in developing coherent policies for how state agencies utilize and caretake historic properties. For too long, we have witnessed viable historic buildings left to deteriorate, with no attempt to secure the building envelope. Agencies were not asked to think beyond maintaining their programs, and often, for want of a minimal investment up front to mothball them, thousands, even millions of dollars in damage have occurred to buildings that were relatively sound when state programs moved out of them. This kind of demolition by neglect is a heartbreak at best, a squandering of public resources at worst.

HB777 takes a measured approach to the issue. Lets take the next 2 years to study the issues, evaluate how many buildings the state owns are underused historic resources with potential for

reuse, see how other states have developed programs to keep heritage buildings functional, and explore potential funding sources to support agencies that continue to inhabit state heritage buildings.

So we invite you to join us in thinking about the future of Montana's heritage properties. We hope you will endorse the notion that the state can and should do better in promoting preservation of its historic properties. High quality historic buildings and intact communities can be a fabulous engine for local economic development. Lets dive in and see just what these buildings can do to foster a better economic outlook for communities such as Columbia Falls, Libby, Boulder, Norris and more.

Thank you for your interest and all of your efforts on behalf of Montana heritage.

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