An effort to preserve West Baton Rouge Parish's first African-American high school passed an important hurdle Tuesday when the state's National Register Review Committee approved the facility's nomination to be placed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The nomination of the "Old" Cohn High School will be forwarded to the state's historic preservation officer. If the nomination is approved at that level, it will then move on to Washington, D.C., for consideration, officials said.

The National Register of Historic Places, established by Congress in 1966, is the nation's official list of significant historic properties.

The nonprofit group DOC-DHL is spearheading the renovation effort and plans to establish a year-round mentoring program for youths at the former high school.

The three buildings on the campus are vacant and used for storage. DOC-DHL is formed from the first letters of the first names of six men who have served for years as mentors to students at Cohn Elementary School: Doug Peters, Owen Cope, Carl Jackson, Darrell Moore, Hall Davis and Laddie Bolden.

At Tuesday's hearing, Pat Duncan, an architectural historian for the state, told the committee that prior to the high school's opening in 1949, black students in West Baton Rouge had a difficult time obtaining a high school education.

Their options included either taking a ferry across the Mississippi River, if they were given a seat, and walking to an African-American high school in Baton Rouge or living with a family member or stranger in another parish and attending classes there.

West Baton Rouge Parish received the land for the school from the Cohn family in 1948, Duncan said, and Cohn High School opened in the fall of 1949.

James A. Gray, a shop teacher, along with his students, helped to subdivide a gymnasium to create classroom space, Duncan said.

"There's no doubt Cohn High School changed the lives of the students who attended there," Duncan said.

The school closed in the mid-1960s during integration.

The committee unanimously approved Tuesday's nomination for a place on the National Register, to applause from the audience, including several of the school's alumni.

The committee is an appointed board composed of lay people and experts in architecture, history and archaeology.

The decision on National Register status is made by the keeper of the National Register in the Department of the Interior.

Duncan has said the register does not put any restrictions on what a property owner may do with his or her property.

The prestige that goes along with the title can only help with fund raising and provide opportunities for tax incentives, Duncan has said.

DOC-DHL plans to convert the vacant high school into a combination education center, historic center, parenting center and public meeting facility. The organizers hope to raise $4 million for the project.