Building's fate at crossroads

State researching downtown site's qualification for national register

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LAFAYETTE — A 19th-century building set to be demolished to make way for a planned Interstate 49 interchange in downtown Lafayette is being researched as a possible nominee for the National Register of Historic Places, a spokesman for the state Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism said this week.

But state transportation officials say they are still moving forward with plans to level the two-story brick structure despite the research work and opposition from the Downtown Development Authority and others who want to spare the historic building.

Believed to have been built in 1885, the structure is the oldest building in a downtown block bounded by Third, Grant, Second and Cypress streets. It is generally known as the "Coburn's building" because of the most recent business to have been located there, a plumbing, heating and air-conditioning business.

The state's historic preservation staff has begun research on whether the building might be a candidate for the National Register of Historic Places, said Jacques Berry, spokesman for the Lieutenant Governor's Office, which oversees the Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism.

"They are in the process of determining if it meets the qualifications," Berry said.

Properties are evaluated for the national register using three criteria: age, significance and integrity.

The building clearly meets the general 50-year age requirement for eligibility, and Berry said it appears to be historically significant.

"It is one of the oldest buildings in Lafayette," he said.

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The Lafayette Downtown Development Authority is opposing plans by the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development to demolish a disused building on the corner of Second and Cypress streets.
According to old newspaper accounts and local histories, the building housed Merchants' Grocer Company, a wholesaler considered a significant turn-of-the-century business in Lafayette that was founded by a group of prominent business leaders.

The integrity component for eligibility in the national register is more difficult to assess and involves researching whether the building has been altered so much over the years that it can no longer be considered historic.

No decision is expected any time soon.

Berry said researching eligibility and then petitioning the National Park Service for inclusion in the register would take at least a year, even if it was an "open-and-shut case."

What all this means for the fate of the building is unclear. Berry said CRT has no plans to intervene in DOTD's plan to demolish the structure.

But a determination that the building is eligible for the National Register of Historic Places might open the door for more discussion of whether it should be spared.

Federal guidelines call on planners to consider the impact to historic properties when designing road projects.

The Coburn's building does not appear to have been considered as a historic property during the initial design process of I-49 through Lafayette.

But the 2003 federal document that served as the formal stamp of approval for the current route of the planned interstate calls for state and federal highway officials to consider any new information about historic properties not initially considered.

That document — called the "Record of Decision" — does not require any design changes but states a consultation "will be conducted ... to develop an appropriate course of action" in the event of newly identified historic properties.

When asked about that provision on Thursday, DOTD spokeswoman Deidra Druilhet said the department needed more time to gather information and would respond Friday.

"At this time, DOTD is moving forward with the demolition of the Coburn's building," she wrote in an email.

Downtown Development Authority CEO Nathan Norris has been working since earlier this year to delay the demolition in hopes of finding a use for the building. He argues there is no need to rush the demolition because the I-49 Connector is still in the planning stages and there is no funding for the road project, which is estimated to cost more than $700 million.

DOTD officials had delayed the demolition but decided earlier this month to move forward, though no date has been set for the building to come down.

DOTD spokesman Rodney Mallett said earlier this month that the property will eventually need to be cleared for the I-49 South project and DOTD sees no reason for further delay.

Supporters of saving the building have countered that the final design of the road is not set in stone, particularly the downtown interchanges.