

City of Detroit
CITY COUNCIL

HISTORIC DESIGNATION ADVISORY BOARD

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March 14, 2024

Senator Gary Peters
Hart Senate Office Building
Suite 724
Washington D.C., 20510

***RE: Federal funding request for the Charles Lang Freer House, 71 East Ferry Ave.,
Detroit, Wayne State University***

Dear Senator Peters,

The Historic Designation Advisory Board of the Detroit City Council is happy to support an earmark funding request by Wayne State University (WSU) in support of urgently needed masonry repairs at the Charles Lang Freer House. The Freer house is a contributing property to the East Ferry Avenue Historic District, designated as an historic district both by the City of Detroit and by the National Park Service with its listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The City of Detroit designated the East Ferry Avenue Historic District in 1981 and expanded the district in 2016, so has long recognized the street's architectural and cultural history and its homes and institutions located in the Art Center District of the Midtown neighborhood. The Freer House was built in 1892 by art collector and philanthropist Charles Lang Freer and is often referred to as the nation's first museum of Asian art, due to Freer's life commitment to travel and art collecting in numerous Asian countries, particularly in Japan.

The Freer House, owned by WSU, in 1920 became the home of the Merrill-Palmer Institute, today known as Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute (MPSI). MPSI is renowned for its role in the study of child and family development and since 1920 has utilized the home for office, classroom, and lecture space. Prior to 1920, the house served as Freer's personal home and galleries to his extensive collection of Asian art, considered one of the most important collections in the United States. As an art collector and philanthropist who valued educating the public about non-Western art, Freer welcomed people to his home to experience his

Senator Gary Peters

March 14, 2024

Page | 2

extraordinary collection of Asian art that would eventually become the primary collection of the Smithsonian Museum's Freer Gallery, today's National Museum of Asian Art (NMAA).

Freer also highlighted the importance of collecting American art, at a time when most wealthy art collectors focused only on European art. His collection elevated the importance of ceramic works by Detroit's own Mary Chase Stratton of Pewabic Pottery and many American painters, including James Abbott McNeill *Whistler*. In fact, Freer built an addition to his home to house *Whistler's* masterpiece Peacock Room, which Freer purchased and moved to Detroit from an English estate that was for sale and where the room faced an uncertain future. The Peacock Room today is a highlight of the Freer Gallery at the NMAA. It is in the Peacock Room in Freer's home on Ferry Avenue where Freer displayed and welcomed friends and interested members of the public to experience both Stratton's and Asian ceramics. Today, the room serves the same purpose at the Smithsonian NMAA, which would not exist without Freer's insistence of the federal government that such an institution be built so his collection could be seen by a national and international audience.

Few people know the NMAA exists today due to Freer's extraordinary gift to our nation of his entire Asian and American art collection and that the collection, in its entirety, at one time was housed in a Shingle-Style home on Detroit's Ferry Street.

Wayne State University today maintains this important landmark house for the use of the MPSI, but also has the opportunity to continue its partnership with the Detroit Institute of Arts and the NMAA of the Smithsonian to highlight its important history in housing this extraordinary collection and advancing the importance and study of the non-Western and American art fields. In addition to the DIA and the NMAA, the Freer House also hosts and partners on many events and educational programs with organizations such as the Japan America Society of Detroit and Windsor, Ontario, the Japanese Consulate of Detroit, the University of Michigan and many other educational institutions. The Freer House also hosts events and highlights the home's tie to women's history on Ferry Avenue.

We hope you will agree the Freer House is much deserved of federal funds to assist with needed masonry repairs to assure its structural stability and ability to serve the public for generations to come.

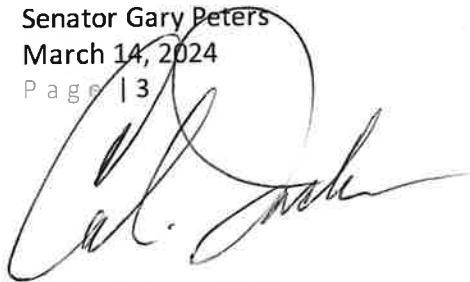
Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Senator Gary Peters

March 14, 2024

Page | 3

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Calvin Jackson", written over a circular stamp or seal.

Calvin Jackson, Chairman
Historic Designation Advisory Board
City of Detroit

cc: Mary Sheffield, President, City Council, City of Detroit
Members of Detroit City Council
Mayor Michael Duggan
David Whitaker, Director, Legislative Policy Division, City of Detroit
Janese Chapman, Director, Historic Designation Advisory Board, City of Detroit
Dr. Kimberly Andrews Espy, President, WSU
Patrick Lindsey, VP, WSU Division of Government and Community Affairs
Amr Abdel-Azim, Interim VP, WSU Facilities Planning and Management
William Colburn, Executive Director, Freer House, WSU