



Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board

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Date: October 3, 2025
To: Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board members
From: Ella Coon, Planner Fellow, Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board (CAAPB)
CC: Erik Cedarleaf Dahl, Executive Secretary, CAAPB
Peter Musty, Principal Planner & Zoning Administrator, CAAPB

**RE: AGENDA ITEM #5 – Application to Propose a New Commemorative Work:
Downtown Baseball Park**

Downtown Baseball Park: “The Pillbox”

History as Presented in Commemorative Works Application Submitted by Stew Thornley, Halsey Hall Chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research:

The Downtown Baseball Park also known as the Pillbox due to its small size, was a historic baseball park which was located on the northwest corner of 12th and Robert, on the site now occupied by the laboratory building for the Minnesota departments of Health and Agriculture. The ballpark, which was in use from 1903 to 1910, was used by St. Paul Saints Minor league team and as a frequent home of a significant all Black team, the St. Paul Gophers (also called the St. Paul Colored Gophers).

The Saints were an all-white team, as were the others in what was called ‘organized baseball,’ because of a racial barrier that existed until the 1940s. Some integrated teams existed at various levels outside the professional ranks, although mostly the game was completely segregated. Even before the formal Negro Leagues were formed, many all-Black professional teams existed, sometimes playing against white teams, both amateur and professional.

The Pillbox in its final years was one of the local homes for the St. Paul Colored Gophers, who played a series of games against the Saints in 1907. Both teams recruited outside players, including a couple of Minneapolis Millers to play with the Saints. The Gophers benefited from the presence of Andrew ‘Rube’ Foster, the manager of the Chicago Leland Giants as well as one of the best Black pitchers in the country (and the man who would organize the Negro National League in 1920). Foster was back with the Colored Gophers in 1908 and pitched a no-hitter over a team from Hibbing August 28.

The following year, the Gophers matched up with the Leland Giants in what was billed as the ‘world’s colored championship.’ Rube Foster was back with his regular team, the Giants, but he broke his leg prior to the games in St. Paul, and the Chicago pitching duties fell to others. The Colored Gophers had

Bobby Marshall, one of Minnesota's most remarkable athletes. A multi-sports star at Central High School in Minneapolis, Marshall became an All-America football player at the University of Minnesota. The Gophers beat the Leland Giants in the series, a victory that established their reputation as one of the best Black teams in the Midwest. The Colored Gophers continued playing at the Pillbox through 1910, when the ballpark was abandoned, hastening the demise of the team.

Through the years, the ballpark had found many uses beyond baseball, from speed skating in the winter to professional wrestling in the summer. The Pillbox site is now occupied by a laboratory building for the Minnesota Departments of Health and Agriculture on the north side of Interstates 94 and 35E, a one mile stretch of freeway known as Spaghetti Junction.



Figure 1. *Downtown Ball Park, St. Paul.* No Date. Minnesota Historical Society.

Staff Acceptance of Application

On December 18, 2024, CAAPB staff received an application from Stew Thornley, of the Halsey Hall Chapter of the Society for American Baseball Research, to add a plaque commemorating the site of the historic Downtown Base Ball Park -- "the pillbox" in Saint Paul.

CAAPB staff reviewed the application per Minnesota Rules 2400.2703, *Subpart 3, Item A*, and deemed it to be incomplete. The applicant was advised of the determination via memo dated December 30, 2024, which also included additional information on what was missing in the application. The applicant resubmitted the addition request on January 2, 2025, and after a second review, CAAPB staff found the submission to be complete on January 15, 2025.

Staff Review and Findings

According to the rules, once CAAPB determines the application to be complete, Board staff must review and analyze whether the application for new commemorative artwork meets the conditions in *M.R.*

2400.2703, Subpart 2 (“Conditions for adding a new artwork”), and prepare a written report with these findings.

Subp. 2. Conditions for adding new artwork. *The board must consider displaying new commemorative artwork in the Capitol area if the artwork meets all the following conditions:*

- A. there has been documented public support of the artwork;*
- B. the artwork has lasting statewide significance for Minnesotans;*
- C. the artwork is respectful of the diversity of Minnesotans;*
- D. viewing the artwork provides a rich experience to broaden the understanding of Minnesota's shared history, heritage, and culture;*

Upon review, CAAPB staff concluded that the addition request meets all the conditions in *Minnesota Rules 2400.2703, Subpart 2*.

Staff analysis (condition A): The applicant asserts statewide support for markers by naming commemorative markers for the Metropolitan Stadium at the Mall of America, Lexington Park Ballpark in St. Paul and Nicollet Park in Minneapolis as examples. The applicant also cited The Society for American Baseball Research as a staunch supporter of nationwide commemorative markers through the organization's Baseball Landmarks Research Committee.

Staff analysis (condition B): The applicant cites the artwork’s statewide significance, cites the sport’s perennial presence in Minnesota’s social and recreational history, illustrating how baseball was embraced in the area as early as 1857, before Minnesota achieved statehood. The applicant further asserts the central role of Saint Paul in the state’s baseball history and the impact of the game on the Twin Cities’ historic rivalry.

- Additional Staff Note: There is established anecdotal popularity of exhibits installed at Target Field in Minneapolis documenting the importance of professional, amateur, and local levels of baseball in communities all over Minnesota.

Staff analysis (condition C): The application showcases intent to celebrate Minnesota’s diversity, throughout highlighting the diverse history of the sport in the state and by identifying all Black players and teams that were associated with the particular park to be commemorated.

Staff analysis (condition D): Although the application doesn’t explicitly expound on how the artwork would broaden the understanding of Minnesota’s shared history, heritage, and culture, the application puts a spotlight on evolution of Minnesota’s baseball history before and after racial segregation and restores underrepresented ballplayers in this history.

Considering the above analysis, CAAPB staff determined **the addition request met the conditions in M. R. 2400.2703, Subpart 2**. Following this determination, CAAPB staff sought and received the Board’s affirmation for a public comment period and the hosting of one public hearing to gather input on whether the application meets the conditions in *M. R. 2400.2703, Subpart 2*. CAAPB staff presented this determination to the Board on March 24, 2025.

That said, staff identified the need to corroborate certain historical facts presented in the application at this stage and engaged an independent historical consultant to these ends. The research findings are described below. The full report is provided as an attachment to this memo.

A Summary of Public Comments

With the Board's affirmation, a 35-day public comment period was opened from March 31 to May 5, 2025. The public hearing was held on May 15, 2025.

CAAPB staff received a total of 16 public comments submitted during the public comment period and the public hearing on May 15th. Staff analyzed only 13 of the 16 comments—three of the comments were submitted twice—both in-person at the hearing and via email. Of the 13 relevant comments: four (30.8 percent) affirmed that the application meets all the conditions in *M.R.2400.2703., Subpart 2*; eight comments (61.5 percent) supported request to commemorate the Pillbox Ball Park on the State Capitol Grounds; and one comment (7.7 percent) opposed the request to commemorate the Pillbox Ball Park on the state Capitol grounds. The single negative comment did not make a statement on whether or not the commemorative work under review meets the conditions in *Subpart 2*.

Historical Background Report on Site of Baseball Park: Pigeon Consulting

Before presenting application to the Board for an action after the public comment period, CAAPB staff engaged Pigeon Consulting, a historic preservation consulting firm, to conduct a background study on the baseball park and its former site for fact-checking purposes.

Staff received the report in June 2025. Upon reviewing the report, the CAAPB staff found no significant factual errors regarding the application as it was submitted by Stew Thornley on January 2, 2025. Staff, however, did identify some ambiguities surrounding less significant historical facts, which may need further corroboration later, if the application advances to the design stage. The report from Pigeon Consulting, however, did raise concerns regarding language used to refer to the park: although the application did not explicitly state the Downtown Baseball Park was named “the pillbox,” the historical report urged further disambiguation, as “pillbox” was a colloquialism for small, urban baseball parks during the early 20th century.

More substantial differences between the report written by Pigeon Consulting and application concerned historical narrative: The independent report placed greater emphasis on the historical evolution of the site, highlighting how a large-scale bakery came to occupy the site in 1910 after the ballpark was demolished; by contrast, the application sought to only commemorate the ballpark.

The CAAPB staff met with Pigeon Consulting on July 24, 2025, to discuss the report's findings in more detail. Although Pigeon Consulting did not offer a formal opinion or recommendation in this meeting, Pigeon Consulting did reemphasize the idea that the bakery was as important to the site's history as the ballpark from a historic preservation perspective. Specifically, Pigeon Consulting highlighted the bakery's importance to local labor history and its relation to larger patterns of immigration to and urban development of the State, a feature of the site's history they saw absent from the application.

This disjuncture between the narrative offered in the report and application spoke to adjacent conversations CAAPB staff and Advisors had earlier in the review process regarding other facets of the ballpark's history missing from the application important to understanding Minnesota's urban history, such as: displacement and demolition associated with the (1) construction of the interstate system and

(2) the destruction of old Central Park and (3) what preceded the ballpark on the site.¹ These omissions take on heightened importance given the former park's location in the current boundaries of the Capitol Area.

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Next Steps

With the successful conclusion of, and reporting on, public comments on the application to add a new commemorative work honoring the former Downtown Baseball Park – “the pillbox” to the Capitol grounds, CAAPB staff are seeking the Board's affirmation that the application for addition meets the criteria in *M. R. 2400.2703, Subpart 2*. By voting in the affirmative, the Board would approve the application's advancement to the next stage of review: site-selection.

That said, staff would like to highlight that even if site selection is approved, the Board may choose at any point in the review process to not advance the application further.

Site Selection

Site selection focuses on locating a suitable space on the Capitol grounds for a proposed commemorative work addition.

The site selection process adheres to the procedure described in *M. R. 2400.2703, Subpart 3, Items F-H* and generally follows these steps:

Once an application is approved by the Board to proceed to site selection, the CAAPB staff begin research to prepare for analyzing possible sites for a new commemorative work. This research is keyed towards developing

- (1) a list of candidate sites for review and
- (2) a set of weighted criteria by which to analyze said locations.

¹ Both the application and independent report note that the Capitol building was being erected during the ballpark's first years of operation.

Next, CAAPB Staff and Advisors, in consultation with the Applicant, select a shortlist of sites from this research to be analyzed according to the developed weighted criteria. The Department of Administration is required to review and comment on this analysis at this stage.

Using these findings, CAAPB staff, in consultation with Advisors, recommend one site for approval to the Board. The recommendation is submitted to the CAAP Board in the form of a letter of resolution from Executive Secretary.

The site ultimately proposed to the Board must abide by the “Criteria for determining location of new artwork” described in *Subpart 4* of the Rules:

Subpart 4. Criteria for determining location of new artwork. The board must use the following criteria to evaluate the proposed location for a commemorative artwork in the Capitol area:

- A. The site of the proposed location must be visible to people nearby and accessible to all members of the public.*
- B. The scale of the artwork must fit in the artwork’s location, providing familiarity to the viewer while not being overpowering. The artwork’s size must not detract from the Capitol. The board must consider the artwork’s visual and spatial relationships to the artwork’s surroundings.*
- C. The use of the site must not interfere with any existing artwork.*
- D. The use of the site must maintain and protect existing open space and the space’s public use.*
- E. The location must also follow all applicable zoning, environmental, code, and public safety rules and regulations.*
- F. The artwork must fit within the thematic organization of the Capitol grounds and comply with the design objectives of the Comprehensive Plan for the Minnesota Capitol Area, which is incorporated by reference into subpart 3, item J. The board must consider the site’s relationship to other artwork and the Capitol.*

Suggested Board Resolutions

The Capitol Area Architectural and Planning Board (“Board”) authorizes its staff to move forward in the CAAPB’s Commemorative Works Rules process regarding the application to add a new commemorative artwork to the Capitol Grounds – the Downtown Baseball Park (previously referred to as “The Pillbox Plaque”) submitted by Stew Thornley on January 2, 2025.

The Board specifically affirms:

- The application, as received, meets the criteria in *M. R. 2400.2703, Subpart 2* (“Conditions for adding new artwork”) and may advance to further stages of review.

The Board authorizes the Executive Secretary to:

- Notify the Department of Administration of the affirmative vote and application's progress within 14 days;
- Undertake a site selection study with the applicant and CAAPB architectural advisers with review and comment by the Department of Administration.

The Board wishes to make clear that approval of these intermediate steps in the Rules process does not communicate approval or disapproval of any portion of the current proposal by the applicant and that approval of these steps does not equate to agreement or judgement as to the veracity of any claim or assertion within the received application.

Attachments

Attachment A: Application as submitted by Stew Thornley.

Attachment B: Complete listing of public comments collected during the comment period (3/31-5/5/2025) and the public hearing (5/15/2025).

Attachment C: Historical report on the history of the baseball park and the historic significance of its location in the Capitol Area produced by Pigeon Consulting.

Attachment D: Graphic representation of rules process for adding a new commemorative work to the Capitol grounds.