



SAVANNAH-CHATHAM COUNTY HISTORIC SITE AND MONUMENT COMMISSION

PUBLIC BUILDING RENAMING RECOMMENDATION

PETITIONER: CITY OF SAVANNAH, Mayor Van R. Johnson, II
FILE No.: 24-004336-HM
LOCATION: 201 Montgomery Street, The Savannah Cultural Arts Center
DATE: September 5, 2024

NATURE OF REQUEST:

The applicant is requesting approval of the renaming of The Savannah Cultural Arts Center to have the name of the Dr. Otis S. Johnson Center, which is located at 201 Montgomery Street.

As per the applicant:

“Mayor Otis Johnson is a Savannah native who graduated A.E. Beach High School in 1960, Armstrong Junior College in 1964, and the University of Georgia (A.B.) in 1967. Mayor Johnson’s impact on the lives of Savannahians, the fabric of our neighborhoods, and his leadership in challenging how we think about and solve problems together is extraordinary and generational.

The Savannah Cultural Arts Center, located at 201 Montgomery Street, is bordered by Marting Luther King Boulevard and Oglethorpe Avenue. This public facility invites and promotes all Savannahians to express themselves freely and openly through artistic expression. This facility’s mission mirrors Mayor Johnson’s achievements in fostering collaboration and open expression of ideas.”

FINDINGS:

The following standards apply:

Article E- Naming and Renaming of Public Property, Facilities and Streets.

General policy. As a general policy, the Mayor and Aldermen find that public property should be named after its principal function, location, or historical reference; however, significant community events, organizations or well-known persons with important contributions to the community, state or nation may deserve public recognition, which may occur by way of naming or renaming public rights-of-way or facilities.

Naming criteria and requirements.

Criteria. Naming or renaming of a public right-of-way or facility shall occur only when the proposed naming or renaming satisfied at least one of the following criteria:

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It honors and commemorates a noteworthy person associated with the City of Savannah, Chatham County, the State of Georgia or the United States of America;

The standard is met. Mayor Otis Johnson had a notable impact on the City of Savannah as 2nd District Alderman and as Mayor from 2004-2011. In addition, he served the City of Savannah in a myriad of other ways with a primary focus on “making conditions better for low-wealth families in Savannah and the south” through his work at Savannah State University and the Chatham Youth Futures Authority, among others.

It commemorates local history, places, events or culture;

It will strengthen neighborhood identity; or

It recognizes native wildlife or natural geographical features.

The standard is met. It commemorates the local history of the area and will strengthen the neighborhood identity through bringing attention to the local efforts of Mayor Otis Johnson who during his eight years in office had a notable impact on the history of the City of Savannah.

Exclusions. *The following shall not be considered for purposes of naming or renaming:*

Persons that resided in the City of Savannah for less than five years, other than prominent national figures;

The standard is met. Mayor Johnson is a native of Savannah and has had a notable impact on the lives of the residents of the City of Savannah.

Names assigned to existing public property within the City or unincorporated Chatham County where duplication of the name is likely to lead to confusion; and

The standards is met. Staff is not aware of any other existing public property with a name duplication.

Except as set forth in Section 4-1106 of this Article, commercial names where usage of such name would amount to advertising.

The standard is met. This is not advertising.

Considerations. *Naming requests shall consider:*

The number of residents and businesses directly affected;

Community diversity;

The historical significance of preexisting name or location;

The appropriateness and compatibility of the request in relation to the existing area;

The impact on emergency service delivery; and

Continuity and stability.

The standard is met. Mayor Johnson’s notable impact on the City of Savannah and the nation as a whole as a leading voice in the on-going effort to see that equality is enjoyed by all would be

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recognized with the proposed renaming of The Savannah Cultural arts Center. The proposed renaming would only impact the facility itself which does not have a historically significant name, would not impact emergency service delivery, and most importantly would contribute to the important recognition of the profound impact that the African-American community has played in the City of Savannah and in particular on the Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard commercial corridor and adjacent residential communities. The proposed renaming would promote community diversity by acknowledging the important role Mayor Johnson played in the development of the City of Savannah.

Additional considerations for persons. Requests to name a public right-of-way or facility in honor of a natural person should also consider the following:

Absent extraordinary or extenuating circumstances, the proposed honoree shall be deceased;

Whether the proposed namesake made a sustained contribution over an appreciable time period, exerted efforts of benefit or significance to local, state or national affairs and/or demonstrated leadership in governmental, cultural or historical affairs, humanitarian efforts, or community development;

Contributions that beneficially changed the nature and characteristics of the community; and

Achievement by a native Savannahian of national or international acclaim in a specific field of endeavor that has reflected positively on Savannah.

The standards are met. Mayor Johnson is fortunately not deceased and continues to serve as a role model for good governance and how one can give back to the community.

In his myriad roles both as a public official, as 2nd District Alderman and Mayor, and as a scholar and non-profit executive, at Savannah State University and the Chatham Savannah Youth Futures Authority, Mayor Johnson has made a profound contributing to both the Savannah region and nation. His continued focus on equality and opportunity for all, which included a period serving on the Savannah Chatham County Board of Education, is an example to be followed.

Mayor Johnson's efforts had a profound impact on the City of Savannah and served as a national model of good governance that sought collaboration and provided an extremely positive view for the nation of the City of Savannah.

Renaming of public property facilities or streets. All requests to rename public property shall be made in writing and directed to the attention of the City Manager. Such requests shall include:

In the instance of a building, structure or facility:

The present official name of the property;

The proposed new name;

The specific location of the property;

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The name address and telephone number of the person requesting the name change;

The standards are met. The present name of the building is The Savannah Cultural Arts Center, the proposed new name of the building is the Dr. Otis S. Johnson Center, the location of the building is 201 Montgomery Street, and the persons requesting the name change are Mayor Van R. Johnson and 2nd District Alderman Detric Leggett.

A statement of reasons supporting the renaming request;

The standard is met. Per the applicant, “Mayor Johnson’s impact on the lives of Savannahians, the fabric of our neighborhoods, and his leadership in challenging how we think about and solve problems together is extraordinary and generational.”

A thorough discussion regarding the history of the property, including all prior names associated therewith; and

The standard is met. The Savannah Cultural Arts Center is a recently completed facility, having been constructed in 2019, and is not associated with a particular individual or community.

An endorsement by the current Mayor, an at-large alderman or the alderman representing the district in which the property is located.

The standard is met. The City of Savannah, Mayor Van R. Johnson, II and 2nd District Alderman Detric Leggett are requesting this renaming

PUBLIC NOTICE:

As required in the Master Plan and Guidelines, written notice was sent to all property owners, and the neighborhood association, within 200 feet of the subject property. A sign was posted on the property fifteen days prior to the meeting. As of the writing of this report no comments were received from the public.

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RECOMMENDATION:

The Historic Site and Monument Commission recommend approval to the Savannah City Council for the Renaming of The Savannah Cultural Arts Center as the Dr. Otis S. Johnson Cultural Arts Center as requested because the proposed renaming of the public building meets the standards within *Article E- Naming and Renaming of Public Property, Facilities and Streets*

DocuSigned by:

Catherine Kostilnik

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**Catherine D. Kostilnik, Chair
Historic Site and Monument Commission**

**September 5, 2024
Date**

DocuSigned by:

Melanie Wilson

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**Melanie Wilson, Executive Director & CEO
Chatham County-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission**

**September 5, 2024
Date**

Signed by:

Jonathan Mellon

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**Jonathan Mellon, Director of Historic Preservation & Urban Design
Chatham County-Savannah Metropolitan Planning Commission**

**September 5, 2024
Date**

MW: JM