Background on Old Cook County Hospital and the National Register

What are the details about the building?

- The nomination includes the Administration Building only; the four pavilions off the back are NOT included; in late 2005, the County Board approved tearing them and other non-controversial buildings down. Fortunately, the pavilions are not integral to the integrity of the Administration Building.

- Architect: Paul Gerhardt, Sr. This German-born architect was very politically connected: his father-in-law was a county commissioner and Chicago alderman in the late 1800s. Gerhardt later went on to serve as the architect of the Chicago Board of Education; he designed Lane Tech High School, among other schools.

- Size: 8 stories high, nearly 555 feet long (as long as the Washington Monument is tall).

- From the 1920s to the 1950s, Cook County Hospital was the largest medical institution in the world, and the Administration Building was at its very heart.

- Construction of the Administration Building began in 1912 and was completed in 1914; the building was finally furnished and occupied beginning in 1915. County commissioners laid the cornerstone on March 8, 1913, during construction. The four pavilions off the back of the Administration Building were constructed in two stages from 1914-17.

- Architectural style: Beaux-Arts/Classical Revival (the same style as the Chicago City Hall/County Building, Union Station, the Field Museum, the Museum of Science and Industry, and the Art Institute).

- Cost: Approximately $3 million in 1914 dollars for the Administration Building, the equivalent of almost $60 million today.

Why is the hospital important?

- Cook County Hospital has been especially important to immigrant and minority communities over the years. In the first decades of the 20th century, so many immigrants were served by the hospital that some dubbed it “Chicago’s Statue of Liberty.” Between the two world wars, however, the demographic mix at the hospital changed, as European immigration declined and African-American migration from the south increased. Until the civil rights movement, Cook County Hospital was one of only a handful of hospitals in the Chicago area open to African-American patients.

- Medical breakthroughs. For decades, the medical staff that worked within these walls faced chronic funding crises, supply shortages, and terrible overcrowding, but it is a testament to the dedication and skills of the staff that they not only managed to care for
patients under these circumstances, but also advanced the frontiers of medicine again and again. The 1914 Cook County Hospital witnessed:

- The first blood bank in the United States, and one of the first in the world (1937). The term "blood bank" was coined by Dr. Bernard Fantus, the hospital's director of therapeutics, for whom Fantus Clinic is named.
- The first trauma center in the United States (1966).
- Significant advances in the field of pathology, for which the hospital was known world-wide.

- Importance to medical education.
  - Cook County Hospital was the major teaching hospital in the Chicago area for decades.
  - Rush Medical School (later University) was founded around the same time as Cook County Hospital, and the two institutions have had a strong relationship for most of that period, continuing into the present.
  - The County created a Cook County School of Nursing and Cook County Graduate School of Medicine (for advanced medical training) to supplement the work of the hospital.
  - The modern medical internship did not exist until it was developed at Cook County Hospital in the 1800s.

- Importance to the personal histories of tens of thousands of families.

- Architectural significance.
  - Possibly the only high-style Beaux-Arts public hospital ever built in the United States.
  - One of the most elaborate Beaux Arts public buildings in the city of Chicago. Other monumental Beaux Arts buildings, such as Union Station and the Field Museum, are much less flamboyant in decoration.

What plans have been proposed to reuse the old hospital?

- In July 2003, ten developers took a tour of Old Cook County Hospital to investigate its potential for reuse; seven months later, in February 2004, five developers formally presented plans to the County Board for the reuse and rehabilitation of the old Cook County Hospital building. Among the uses proposed in the various plans: medical offices, hotel, wellness center, and medical staff apartments.

- The 2004 study conducted by US Equities on behalf of the County administration concluded that the old hospital could be reused for medical offices, even though that option would be more costly than demolition and a new building; preservationists dispute
those cost projections and note that private financing proposals would have access to rehabilitation tax credits (see above).

What is the National Register of Historic Places?

- A national list of historically and architecturally important buildings and sites, maintained by the National Park Service.

- It does not establish any legal barriers hampering demolition, but listing would be an overdue reflection of the historical importance and architectural significance of the building.

- Also, if the County were to enlist the help of a private developer to renovate the hospital, National Register status would allow the developer to apply for historic renovation tax credits. These tax credits can recoup up to 20% of the cost of rehabilitation—in the case of the hospital, the credit could be worth $12 million or more, according to estimates—so long as the cost equals or exceeds the pre-rehab value of the building and the rehabilitation work is done to specified standards.

- The county, like all units of government and unlike private property owners, may not object to listing on the National Register.

What is the process for listing on the National Register?

- The old hospital already has been determined eligible for the National Register by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (1994 or thereabouts). This means that in the minds of the experts at the state agency, the building clearly qualifies for listing.

- Once submitted, the nomination will be reviewed for completeness by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency.

- The application then will be forwarded to Chicago Landmarks Commission and Mayor Daley for approval (Chicago is what is known as a Certified Local Government—that is, it has an enforceable preservation ordinance). If the Landmarks Commission and mayor approve of the listing, the nomination returns to the state; if they object, the nominator may appeal directly to the state agency.

- Once the nomination returns to the state level, it will be reviewed by the Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Council (IHSAC), a volunteer state board composed of architects, historians, and others.

- If IHSAC approves, then the nomination goes to the state historic preservation officer for his/her sign-off; if the state does not approve the listing, the nomination may be appealed directly to the federal government.

- Once completely approved by the state, the nomination will be sent to the National Park Service for final approval and listing on the National Register.
Some Random Stories About the Hospital

- The original design called for a 10-story building. Several months after the plans were first announced, one story quietly disappeared from the plans, then another a few months later. No official explanation was ever given. Cost is the most likely reason, though the county board president at the time did say he thought 10 stories was too tall for a hospital.

- The architect, Paul Gerhardt, allowed the County to seek contracts despite knowing that construction of the hospital as designed would cost far more than the budgeted amount. Gerhardt was fired by a new county board president before this situation came to light, but the County Board would ultimately be forced to seek several million more dollars from the voters to complete the building.
MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayor Richard M. Daley, City of Chicago
Brian Goeken, Landmarks Division, Department of Planning and Development

FROM: Tracey A. Sculle, Survey and National Register Coordinator

DATE: June 6, 2006

SUBJECT: Preliminary Opinion for the Cook County Hospital Administration Building

The Cook County Hospital Administration Building located at 1835 West Harrison Street meets Criterion A and C for listing in the National Register of Historic Places. The Administration Building was constructed between 1912 and 1914 with the substantial pavilions added in 1914 and 1917. Over time, additions—including the 1927 Receiving Building—have been added to the rear of the main building between the pavilions to accommodate new uses. In 1961, the Fantus Clinic was built adjacent to the hospital and later connected to the main building. The Fantus Clinic is considered a non-contributing building. Cook County Hospital’s period of significance is from 1912 when constructed started to 1956, the fifty-year cutoff established by the National Register.

The contribution of Cook County Hospital to the medical and social history of Chicago is remarkable. The daily service of the hospital and its staff to the community had a significant impact on people’s lives at a local level. The medical breakthroughs, which occurred at the hospital, such as the establishment of the first blood bank, had an impact at a national level. Architecturally, the hospital building is also important, as an excellent example of the Beaux Arts architectural style, as applied to a monumental public facility.

Over the years, there have been some alterations and additions to the exterior and interior of the Cook County Hospital. Many of these changes occurred during the period of significance. Some exterior modifications include the removal of the mansard roofs that topped the two end pavilions, brick infill in some window openings, the introduction of a metal canopy over the original main entrance, and building additions. The most significant interior change involves the modification of the original entrance area lobby space, reconfigurations of rooms on various floors, and the removal of most fireplaces. However, the general floor plan appears to remain mostly intact and continues to convey the sense of the historic use of the space as a hospital.

Cook County Hospital still clearly reflects its historical and architectural significance, retains sufficient integrity for listing, and will make an excellent addition to the National Register of Historic Places.