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August 2, 2024

RE: 1500 East 12th Street

Dear Chair Heimsath, Vice Chair Witt Featherston, and Members of the Historic Landmark Commission,

[Preservation Austin](#) exists to empower Austinites to shape a more inclusive, resilient, and meaningful community culture through preservation. We write to you today in support of designating 1500 East 12th Street as a City of Austin Historic Landmark for its Architecture, Historic Association, and Community Value. Our support for this case is in alignment with our Underrepresented Heritage Advocacy Priority, which seeks to identify and designate historic sites associated with African Americans, Mexican Americans, Native Americans, the LGBTQIA community, and women.

Built between 1889 and 1911, the store at 1500 E. 12th St. traces the diverse heritage of East Austin. The building's early history reflects the German heritage of Austin and Central Texas – initially constructed by grocer and politician Christian J. Willhem, it was later acquired by Dessau merchants Ernest and Louisa Eisenbeiser, who operated a produce and dry goods store, a saloon, and a restaurant there.

In 1950, Black businessman Buford Johnson purchased the building, transforming it into a community hub for East Austin's African American population during the Jim Crow era. By the mid-1950s, the building housed the Fifteen Hundred Beauty and Barber Shops, as well as Club Fifteen Hundred, a bar and music venue. It later became the home of the Gamma Eta Alpha chapter of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, the oldest fraternity in America to admit Black members. The building is prominently situated at the corner of E. 12th and Comal Streets, directly across from the I.Q. Hurdle and Southgate-Lewis Houses – both landmarks of Austin's Black heritage – reflecting the greater importance of this intersection to the story of Black East Austin.

Preservation Austin wholeheartedly supports the designation of 1500 E. 12th St. as a City of Austin Historic Landmark. We thank you for your consideration of this case and for your service to the City of Austin.

Sincerely,

Melissa Barry, President