

OFFICIAL MINUTES
MUSCATINE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
MARCH 30, 2011

The Muscatine Historic Preservation Commission (MHPC) met in regular session on Wednesday, March 30, 2011, at 5:15 p.m. in the city hall lower level conference room. Members present included Jane Reischauer, Ramiro Vazquez, Anna Mack, Devin Pettit, Jim Schmidt and JoAnn Carlson. Also present were Muscatine Community Development Director Steve Boka; Muscatine City Planner Andrew Fangman; historical consultant Rebecca McCarley; Michael Maharry and John Peterschmidt, both of the Friends of Muscatine Historic Preservation; and MHPC city liaison Jim Rudisill.

The commission reviewed the consent agenda, including the distributed agenda and the minutes of the regular February 16, 2011 meeting. Pettit pointed out the May tour of homes had been rescheduled to August as part of the 2011 Preservation Iowa Annual Conference. Pettit then moved to approve the consent agenda with the change in the minutes; Carlson seconded; motion passed, all ayes.

Reischauer opened the initial discussion, explaining to Boka and Fangman the commission was interested in learning the current status of homes in the West Hill Historic District that had been posted by the city. She asked if the planning and zoning commission had any specific policy regarding houses in danger.

Boka explained the houses posted with Not For Occupancy signs had failed an inspection and the owner had not completed work to put the property into compliance with the city code; or the owner had failed to pay an assessment made on the property.

Boka said posting the sign was the city's primary method of obtaining the owner's attention and meeting all obligations. He stressed the signs were not intended to mean any posted property was slated for demolition. Those cases are handled on an individual basis, with the final decision on demolition up to the city council.

Reischauer asked if the city was seeing an increase in the number of postings since she was noticing more of them. Boka acknowledged that could be happening, but attributed any increase to the possible rash of foreclosures. He also pointed out once a property is abandoned or left vacant there is often an increase in the amount of damage to the buildings. Boka also said the postings might seem to be increasing because the city had switched to a bright red sticker that was more noticeable. That switch was done partly to ensure potential buyers were aware of the situation with the property.

Pettit then questioned the city staff on the city's urban revitalization plan. He said the plan had not been well promoted and many residents and property owners are not aware of it. He also expressed hope that good maps of the area were available.

Boka said his department was working on a plan that would expand the current urban revitalization district (URD) to the entire community. This would require identifying some of the area as blighted, based as the number of foreclosures, vacancy rates and other issues.

He said city staff was currently working with the county assessor's office to develop a list of properties that were not holding their value in the community. The downtown and the south end around the Garfield Elementary School were both areas that might qualify for the designation, he reported.

Boka also said the staff was investigating using the 2010 Census figures to help develop programs that could provide incentives to property owners. He outlined the basic parameters of the city's urban revitalization plan and also updated the group on the city's Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program. He said the council's policy on TIF was not to grant it for residential development. If a TIF area however could be identified as blighted, the normal expiration of that TIF would be extended until the area recovered.

Maharry asked if the TIF program had been utilized in the community for historic preservation. Petite said the Downtown Action Alliance was looking into using TIF funding and the Urban Revitalization District program to help with façade renovation in the downtown. He said an expansion of the URD into West Hill would be welcomed. Pettit said the MHPC should help bring awareness of the city's urban revitalization program to the public.

McCarley also said the State Historical Society of Iowa (SHSI) offered a tax exemption program. That program would require developing a local list of targeted properties. Maharry then asked about the possibility of the city acquiring a targeted property and offering it for sale to the public, with the stipulation it must be repaired. He said this would offer an alternative to demolition.

Boka said a partnership could be established under existing state legislation, but he doubted such an effort would succeed in Muscatine because of the financial, time and people issues involved. He said demolitions require council approval and he stressed that request was the absolute last resort. He said demolishing encourages the deterioration of neighborhoods, although in some cases, the city must act.

Boka said as long as an owner has a reasonable plan to renovate a deteriorated building, the city would work with the owner. He praised Maharry's work with the property at 417 W. Third as an example of restoring a property that had seriously deteriorated.

Boka and the commission also discussed the impact of rentals on the city's aging housing inventory. Boka reported rental property is required to be registered with the city and subject to a three-year inspection cycle; or more frequently if needed. He said properties rented under the Section 8 program are inspected annually. He indicated support for conducting inspections whenever a tenant moves in or moves out.

Boka also said the city was working with staff of the Muscatine Area Geographic Information Consortium (MAGIC) to add a zoning layer to the existing website. Adding that layer would help alert the public and discourage conversions of property to uses prohibited by the zoning ordinance.

Vazquez asked about the disposition of the land when a building is demolished. Boka said the city does not acquire the property whenever a building is demolished. Possession remains with the original owner. The city does attach a lien to the property for the demolition. He said in cases where the city does acquire land, there are formal procedures that must be followed to sell it.

Boka also expressed support for developing a property taxing procedure that would assess a higher property tax on properties that are allowed to deteriorate.

He also mentioned the city was developing an evaluation of the Mississippi corridor, including a Brownfield assessment. Traffic options are part of the evaluation. Boka said eventually the TeStrake and Beach Lumber site could be cleared, which would expose more of the McKee Button Company building, which he said is a much better preserved historic building than either of the other two locations.

Boka said much of the old button cutting machinery is intact at McKee and he envisioned it could eventually be developed into a museum or exhibit building. He said an open house to review plans for the corridor would be held May 11 from 4-7 p.m. in the Stanley Auditorium.

Maharry asked about an update of the city's comprehensive plan, which was completed in 2002. Boka reported with the new planning position filled and new numbers from the 2010 Census, an update would likely be conducted soon. He said Fangman had already roughed out some sections of an updated plan.

Boka also suggested the city's traffic committee could be asked to support consolidating and providing property location information. He suggested walking tours within historic districts could be color-coded. McCarley said signs for historic districts normally are placed around the district boundaries. Near the end of the discussion with Boka, commission members also welcomed Fangman to the community.

The next discussion item for the commission under the general category of CLG Activities was a review of past inventory actions and consideration of future efforts. Reischauer said the discussion should focus on improving historic districts. McCarley said identifying historic districts in a community helps people who want to do something with their properties.

McCarley said local programs might be available, along with tax credits and other funding sources. She suggested if people are not using the available funding programs, more publicity or a seminar might be helpful.

Pettit said state grants are available to help publish booklets and other publicity material. McCarley agreed and said the Historic Resource Development Program (HRDP) would have around \$500,000 available in May, with about \$300,000 of that targeting historic preservation.

Pettit said the MHPC had talked about moving forward with an inventory of Mulberry Avenue, something he would support. However, because of the MHPC's past history with volunteers and other issues, obtaining council support could be a problem. He wondered if doing more with the current districts might be more feasible.

McCarley said both activities could be possible with a combination HRDP. She said other similar applications had been presented and approved for funding. Under that plan, a windshield survey would be conducted to establish potential district lines for a Mulberry Historic District. A determination of eligibility could then be approved by the SHSI, which would then allow less detailed surveys of the resources within the proposed district. McCarley estimated the demand on time could be one-third or less than the amount needed for the more intensive survey and evaluation procedure. That would reduce the demand for volunteer hours.

McCarley said the contexts for Muscatine historic districts had also already been established, so that would mean less time on any potential areas. She said some downtown projects she was involved with in other communities only required 200-300 volunteer hours.

Peterschmidt also encouraged the commission to decide whether it wished to pursue more district nominations or begin to focus on completing inventories of significant properties in the community. He said he had worked on a draft of the Oscar Grossheim house at 110 E. Eighth. The draft might eventually be used to nominate the property to the National Register (NR). He said the same process could be used for the James Weed House at 1124 Oakland Drive.

Rudisill had received Peterschmidt's draft of the Grossheim House and had forwarded to McCarley to review. She told Peterschmidt the draft was a good start, but would need more details if it was intended for a NR nomination. There was also some discussion concerning if the house had enough significance to qualify for the register, since Grossheim's business location was extant. McCarley suggested before there was any effort to develop a full NR nomination for the Grossheim house, the inventory form be "fleshed out". She also said both Weed Houses should be submitted to the state for a determination of significance.

McCarley then suggested the MHPC needed to identify its goals. If one of the objectives is to create more districts, all four primary potential districts are strong enough to skip through the intensive survey stage, she reported. Under that scenario, a potential project might cost \$15,000 to complete. If a \$10,000 HRDP grant was awarded, the local share would be \$5000. She said she would develop a cost estimate for doing all four districts at the same time, but assumed there would be a cost savings.

The commission next discussed property and district issues.

There was no new information on the Alexander Clark NHL status.

The signage issue had been discussed earlier with Boka and there was no further discussion on it.

The status of the 2011 Preservation Iowa Annual Conference was then discussed.

Maharry reported there was a movement away from focusing the conference on tax credits, since that topic would be discussed during other programs held earlier in the year. He said there was a continuing effort to have Jim Leach, former Iowa congressman and currently National Endowment for the Humanities Chair, attend the conference as a keynote speaker. Walking tours of the downtown and other tours involving the Greenwood Cemetery and possibly Mulberry Avenue have been suggested.

Pettit also reported the Trinity Church restoration project was still moving forward and it might offer an opportunity for the conference.

Under other reports, Maharry reminded the commission that the National Main Street Conference would be held in May in Des Moines; and urged local participation.

The meeting then adjourned at approximately 7:25 p.m.

The next regular meeting of the commission is scheduled for Wednesday, April 20, 2011 at 5:15 p.m. in the Muscatine City Hall lower level conference room.

Respectfully submitted,

Chair