

OFFICIAL MINUTES
MUSCATINE HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
APRIL 23, 2013

The Muscatine Historic Preservation Commission (MHPC) met in regular session on Tuesday, April 23, 2013, at 5:15 p.m. in the city council chambers at Muscatine City Hall. Members present included Devin Pettit, Jane Reischauer and Julie Wolf. Others present included Muscatine Community Development Director Steve Boka, Michael Maharry and Jim Rudisill. Following the roll, the commission reviewed the consent agenda, including the distributed agenda and the minutes of the regular March 26, 2013 meeting. Pettit moved to approve the minutes as submitted; Wolf seconded; motion passed, all ayes.

The first agenda item discussed under Certified Local Government (CLG) activity was the city's proposed historic property tax abatement plan.

Boka said the first reading of the proposed plan had passed its first reading at the last council meeting; and he wanted to provide the commission with an opportunity to ask any questions it might have on the proposal. He explained it was being offered with the hope it would change how residential properties are treated in Muscatine. He said tax abatements for residential properties had not previously been offered, although allowed under the Iowa Code.

The process had started last summer in a presentation to the city council. The latest step had been to notify around 4000 property owners about the proposal. The second and third readings of the plan are scheduled for the city council's May 2 and May 16 meetings respectively. It would become effective upon publication.

Boka said the only disruption to that schedule would be if one of the 4000 property owners notified requested a public hearing.

He then provided a brief summary of the proposal.

The effort is aimed at providing incentives to develop areas within the city and near city services. There would be a concentration on in-fills within subdivisions. New homes valued at \$75,000 or higher would be eligible for a five-year, 100% tax abatement.

There would also be incentives in the city's blighted area.

New homes costing up to \$250,000 would be eligible for the same abatement. The approval of the Muscatine Historic Preservation Commission would be needed for any new home proposed in the West Hill Historic District. The commission would determine if the new house is historically sensitive to the district.

Houses within the blighted district, including the West Hill Historic District, could also be eligible for a three-year, 100% abatement, if the value of the house is increased by at least 10%. If the owner of a historic property in the district applied to the MHPC for approval, the three-year abatement would climb to five years. The MHPC would determine if the project maintained historic integrity and significance of the property. The density of occupants in a West Hill Historic District property could not be increased under this section.

Boka said the Downtown Commercial Historic District was not included in the program because of the density issue. He said the community did support restoration of downtown upper story apartments, which would increase the residential density. He said the downtown program would be similar to the general program developed for the blighted area.

He also reported if new historic districts were developed, the city could add them to the existing program through an amendment.

Several questions were then asked.

Maharry wondered about the application schedule.

Boka said once property owners received valuations they could submit an application to the city. All applications would need to be filed with the county assessor by February 1. The assessor would make the final determination on eligibility, based on the increase in value.

Maharry also asked what could get owners to the 10% value increase.

Boka suggested calling the county assessor first and explaining the work planned would be helpful. A building permit would also be needed and some estimate of project cost would need to be listed on it.

Reischauer asked if county offices other than the county assessor would have any role in the program.

Boka said the county could offer a similar program.

He also pointed out the abatement would run with the property and not the owner. He also wanted to make the process flow smoothly, with no bureaucratic or cumbersome procedures that might discourage owners from participating.

The participation of the MHPC in the process would be important and would allow the MHPC to monitor and influence historic restoration work on West Hill, Boka said, adding he felt it would reverse the tendency of increasing density in the area.

He said the basic parameters to get the MHPC involved may be completed by next month.

Boka then briefly discussed the adoption and implementation of the historical code section of the International Building Code. Maharry had thought it might provide more flexibility for the city to protect historic features.

However, Boka said that code is fairly rigid and the city already provides allowances for historic features if something is being changed.

The commission then received an update from Rudisill on the Alexander Clark National Register update.

Rudisill reported there had been a conference call on April 18 involving Kent Sissel, Paul Finkelman, State Historical Society of Iowa officials and National Park Service officials. As a result of the call, the Historic Resources Development Program grant will be extended to 2014.

The final CLG discussion was on the status of the Fair Oaks/Colver Street Surveys being completed by consultant Rebecca McCarley. Rudisill reported he had not received any reports yet from McCarley. She had indicated at the March MHPC meeting she expected the reports would be completed by the end of April.

Reischauer reported no funders had requested their funding support be returned.

The next general agenda item was a discussion on historic districts and properties.

Rudisill reported he had talked with Kent Sissel and had been told an old barn at 204 W. Fourth would likely soon be demolished. According to Sissel, the owner is unable to save the barn, which has a variety of structural issues.

Sissel said he might salvage some of the barn siding to construct a small shed or canopy on his property.

Miscellaneous reports were then presented to the commission.

Reischauer reported the Muscatine County HPC planned to hire McCarley to obtain Certified Local Government (CLG) status.

She also reported the commission was seeking female members.

Maharry presented properties that were to be recognized during Historic Preservation Month in May. The list included 1222 Mulberry and 113 W. Sixth.

Reischauer moved to approve the list for award; Wolf seconded; motion passed all ayes.

Maharry also announced plans to increase member.

Maharry also reported on his efforts to convince the school to save the Jefferson Elementary Building or allow a more detailed examination of the building prior to its demolition. Maharry said he had talked to Supt. Bill Decker, who said he was just following the school board orders involving the building. Decker also told Maharry the school did not need an administration building.

Maharry indicated he was disappointed there would be limited information in the new building about the old Jefferson school because of the documentation decision. He also indicated he was disappointed over the shortsighted thinking relating to the administrative use for Jefferson.

He also reported houses the school purchase on East Ninth Street, across from the school. He said the houses would be moved in July. The school will subsidize the move. Pettit said he remained concerned over the future of two likely historic properties on Mulberry that could be impacted because of the Ninth Street properties move.

The meeting then adjourned at approximately 6:30 p.m.

The next regular meeting of the commission is scheduled for Tuesday, May 28, 2013 at 5:15 p.m. in the Muscatine City Hall lower level conference room.

Respectfully submitted,

Chair