
*Village of Oak Park
Village-wide Strategic Historic Preservation Plan
Public Workshop #1
October 21, 2009
7-9PM
Brooks Middle School*

The Village of Oak Park engaged Business Districts, Inc. (BDI) in August 2009 to develop a Village-wide Strategic Historic Preservation Plan. The resulting plan, to be completed in April 2010, will guide the Village's historic preservation work through the next decade.

The first of three Public Workshops, scheduled as part of the current preservation planning process, was held on Wednesday October 21, 2009 at 7PM at Brooks Middle School. The purpose of this initial Public Workshop was to solicit the thoughts, attitudes, and concerns about historic preservation from Oak Park citizens. This Public Workshop was organized to focus on the future of historic preservation throughout the entire Village. At the start of the workshop, participants were asked to consider either what could or can be part of Oak Park's future historic preservation efforts, and not to dwell on past issues.

The agenda for this first Public Workshop was divided into three sets of participatory activities: a brief overview of the project process to date, a BDI-led facilitated participation process, and an interactive summary of the public input obtained during the session. The overview portion of the agenda included both a summary of project work to date and an initial exercise to help workshop participants consider those assets, issues, and programs that could potentially guide the Village's historic preservation efforts in the upcoming decade. The assets, issues, and programs noted during this initial exercise became the basis for the workshop's facilitated activities.

In addition, workshop participants were provided with a common set of facts as a handout at the start of the public workshop. (The project update presentation was also provided as a handout.) These common facts included established facts about historic preservation and about the Oak Park community. Both handouts are available, with this document, on the Village webpage for this project.

During the facilitated portion of the workshop, participants were asked to specifically discuss the assets, issues, and opportunities for historic preservation in Oak Park. The entire participant group considered each of the three categories in approximately twenty-minute intervals. The participants were asked to identify and state their individual priorities in each of these three categories. BDI and Village staff recorded these priorities on separate flip charts. Once the discussions about the three categories were complete, the participants were asked to rank their priorities among the stated assets, issues, and opportunities. Each participant was given twelve (12) dots to identify their priorities on the three sets of flip charts. Once completed, the ranked priorities were discussed and summarized, and the workshop concluded.

The historic preservation priorities by category as identified by the workshop participants are shown below. All of the priorities discussed during the workshop are listed according to the participants' final ranking. The number of dots, or votes, is shown in parentheses next to each priority.

Assets

Strong urban fabric that supports architecture (11)
Tourism i.e. Frank Lloyd Wright and the Prairie School and Hemingway (6)
Access to transportation (5)
Supportive, educated citizens who live/moved to Oak Park because of preservation (4)
Internationally significant architecture highlighting the value and need for historic preservation (2)
Sentiment to preserve but not at any cost (2)
Adaptive re-use—commercial (2)
Public sense of preservation (2)
Existing building stock, in addition to those of international significance (2)
Institutions and infrastructure support preservation (2)
Vernacular and designed building stock (2)
Three historic districts (1)
Many people knowledgeable about historic preservation (1)
Strong underlying real estate values—affordable?
Historic programs
Historical Society
Commissions/Ordinances—“tune up”; “ahead of game”
Experience and expertise

In considering Oak Park's assets, the community's overall urban fabric was identified as the participants' key priority asset. Per the participant discussion, Oak Park's urban fabric provides the context for quality architecture of all types, reflecting the community's varied and important architectural history over time. This urban fabric, including Oak Park's internationally significant buildings, supports both the value and the need for preservation in the future. Other important assets included tourism, the community's access to transportation, and the community's general support for preservation aims. Finally, several assets suggesting multiple stakeholder support for preservation objectives were identified.

Issues

Elected officials and Village administration lack of knowledge of historic preservation process and lack of support (9)
Recognition of historic assets beyond the Prairie School—not everything old should be preserved; mid-century losses at expense of others (8)
Using preservation to halt or delay development (7)
Penalties for demolition too low (7)

Reality of historic credits does not match hype for commercial; residential state credit is not understood (7)
Lack of understanding of benefits of historic preservation among property owners and business owners (6)
Need better understanding of adapting historic buildings to sustainability standards (6)
Low collaboration among community organizations (5)
Limited financial incentives to support preservation of commercial, residential, and multi-unit properties (4)
In-fill buildings compatible with historic scale yards and preserving larger lots as open space (3)
New construction needs to have better design, continuing community history of excellent design (3)
Balancing commercial tenant needs with historic preservation requirements (3)
Will the struggling economy cause the community to lower preservation standards? (2)
Emotion (2)
Local press doesn't always support historic preservation (2)
Roosevelt Road streetscape and building demolitions
Affordability of property
Onerous permit process in general

In identifying Oak Park's preservation issues, the most important issue identified by participants was lack of knowledge or understanding by multiple key, local constituencies. These issues included a perceived lack of knowledge by Village officials about historic preservation process and that this lack of knowledge contributed to a lack of support for historic preservation in the Village. The lack of understanding of potential preservation benefits for multiple property types encompassed another set of issues noted. The issue of what should be preserved was also considered—primarily, what types of buildings beyond the Prairie School architecture should be considered for future preservation? The application of preservation process during development review was also noted as an important issue to address in the future.

Programs

Real historic preservation 'carrots' for commercial properties: rebates; tax abatements; faster review process (13)
Incentives: grants; historic preservation awards funding; TIF funding of projects; permit waivers (10)
Education about existing loan/grant programs (10)
Comprehensive website showcasing best places in Oak Park (8)
Homeowner seminars for: historic designation pros and cons; preservation rules and regulations (6)
More user friendly website as first source for Village programs/issues (5)
More 'how to' use economic incentives: tax credits; tax freeze; Class L (2)
User-friendly brochure on purpose of preservation (1)
Building product sources

The participants felt that incentives well suited to local property owners were needed to support their preservation efforts, regardless of property type. Conversely, certain incentives are available but rarely used. The state property tax freeze program for residential property owners was specifically noted as an incentive rarely accessed by Oak Park owners. Virtually all of the programmatic priorities emphasize two points: education for Oak Park's property owners about preservation opportunities and enhancing access to and development of meaningful incentives to enable good historic preservation results.