

Downtown Oak Park Historic Preservation

"The basic purpose of preservation is not to arrest time, but to mediate sensitively with the forces of change. It is to understand the present as a product of the past and a modifier of the future."

John Lawrence, Dean, Tulane University School of Architecture

Mission Statement

It is the role of the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to "identify, preserve, protect and enhance the distinctive historic and architectural heritage of Oak Park" and to "enhance the attractiveness of the Village to homeowners, visitors, tourists and shoppers, and thereby supporting business, commerce and industry and providing economic benefits." To those ends, it is the goal of the HPC to develop a consensus of opinion within the community on the role historic preservation should play in the future development and revitalization of downtown. Through a series of public meetings, educational workshops and discussions with Downtown Oak Park (DTOP), the HPC will continue the community dialogue started several years ago on this issue. Discussions will focus on an overall role for preservation in downtown, the role of the Village related to preservation, the possibility of official historic designations of properties or districts and of financial incentives to encourage preservation and adaptive reuse. The HPC will ultimately report back to the Village Board of Trustees with recommendations for incorporating preservation goals into downtown planning.

Background

Preserving downtown Oak Park's historic/small town character was one of the top objectives listed by the public during the Downtown Master Planning process. Consequently, the Village Board at that time included several amendments to the Master Plan that called for an increased discussion and role for preservation. Incorporating preservation planning was an important recommendation of the Downtown Steering Committee and is a goal of the Village Board. These things have occurred because of a general understanding that preserving the community's historic and architectural character makes Oak Park a unique attraction to residents, tourists and regional shoppers and should be an important part of the economic vitality of the downtown.

The HPC has been addressing downtown historic preservation issues for several years. It participated in the Village effort to preserve the historically significant Drechsler Building as part of a larger redevelopment project in 2004. It conducted a historic architectural survey of downtown properties between 2003 and 2005. It commented on the Downtown Master Planning process and participated in the Steering Committee process. It is participating in the Marion Street reopening project. This current process will provide a framework for including historic preservation as a planning tool for future downtown revitalization efforts and to clearly define the role that historic preservation should play when considered with other vital interests.

Historic preservation is a planning tool, similar to those of zoning, plan development ordinances, and TIF districts. These planning tools allow a community to shape and influence the appearance and form of a neighborhood and to actively encourage revitalization. In the case of downtown, these tools can influence and guide the future development and economic revitalization in a positive manner that balances sometimes competing interests. The result should be a downtown that retains its historic character and sense of place while remaining an attractive location for businesses and providing flexibility for reasonable growth and new development.