

Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission
Proposed Expansion of the
Frank Lloyd Wright-Prairie School of Architecture Historic District
June 23, 2011 Meeting Minutes
Oak Park Public Library, Council Chambers – 7:00 pm

ROLL CALL

PRESENT: Chair Christina Morris, Joerg Albrecht, Garret Eakin, Frank Heitzman, Michael Plummer, Bob Lempera, Drew Niermann, Rosanne McGrath,
ABSENT: Regina Nally, Gary Palese, Tony Quinn
STAFF: Douglas Kaarre, Urban Planner

A. Welcome – Christina Morris, Chair, Historic Preservation Commission

Chair Morris provided an introduction to the meeting and outlined the proposal and process.

Four people were in attendance at the meeting in addition to commission members and Village staff. The make-up of those in attendance included those in support, those in opposition and many who came with questions and/or concerns.

Don Southworth, 830 Belleforte Avenue, asked why the 800 block of Belleforte is historic.

Planner Kaarre outlined the reasoning behind the proposed new boundaries. He showed a map with all Prairie-influenced properties.

Greg Smith, 810 Belleforte Avenue, stated that he supports the historic district expansion and thanked the commission for their work. He asked what would change for property owners in the expanded boundaries.

Commissioner Albrecht outlined the permit review process and that the commission reviews changes to facades visible from the street, including additions and demolition.

Chair Morris stated that they have Guidelines property owners can consult, which they are currently in the process of revising to make more user-friendly. In addition, Staff approves approximately 85% of all permits.

Mr. Smith asked if there was an appeals process to a commission decision.

Commissioner Heitzman stated that any commission decision can be appealed to the Village Board. He discussed the review process through the Architectural Review Committee (ARC) and the Architectural Review Guidelines. He noted that modern additions to historic buildings are feasible and encouraged. The Guidelines call for differentiating between old and new.

Mr. Smith noted that there were a number of new homes constructed in his neighborhood.

Commissioner Eakin stated that a few of them are not compatible with the neighborhood due to their scale and garage doors facing the street.

Commissioner Albrecht noted that it can be an advantage to go through the ARC review process as many previous owners have noted that it improved their projects.

Chair Morris noted that it is not to the HPC's advantage to deny a project outright. The process works to meet the owners needs and the Guidelines.

Jim Vanderheyden stated that he is an architect who works in Oak Park frequently and for many years. He has been through the process many times and has never found the HPC or the Guidelines to be a hindrance. You get good input that improves the quality without changing the scope of work.

Mr. Smith noted that he is an attorney with the River Forest Historic Preservation Commission, which is still fairly new. He asked if the commissioner members are required to have specific backgrounds.

Planner Kaarre stated that the Article 23 of the Village code requires eight members of the Commission to have demonstrated expertise in various fields, such as history, architectural history, architecture, real estate, historic preservation and others. One member of the Commission shall be a homeowner or business owner or representative located in a designated Oak Park Historic District. The remaining two shall have at least a demonstrated interest or knowledge in historic preservation.

Ray Johnson, Village Trustee, stated that in the years he has been on the Village Board there have only been a few appeals to come before them.

Planner Kaarre stated that there have probably been 5-6 appeals in the last 10 years.

Esteban Garza, property owner, asked what the benefits of living in a historic district are for property owners.

Chair Morris stated that new buildings constructed in a historic district that are out of scale have more impact designation. The designation does not impact property values or taxes. There are decades of research that show district designation at a minimum stabilizes property values. The Tax Freeze is an economic incentive for owners who rehab their home.

Commissioner McGrath noted that scheduling a preliminary review with Village staff prior to submitting for a permit is very important and can save time and money.

Chair Morris stated that they are currently working on streamlining the process and creating additional educational materials for property owners.

Mr. Vanderheyden stated that the current process is more efficient than the old process.

Mr. Smith asked about the timeline for designating the boundary expansion and how it would change the Village's review of property maintenance.

Mr. Garza asked about the designation process and if there would be a public vote.

Chair Morris stated that if there is no substantial objections from property owners a public hearing would be held later this year with recommendations to the Village Board. The HPC is seeking feedback from property owners through these public outreach meetings, via written correspondence or email, or at regular HPC meetings. They are not seeking a public vote.

Mr. Southworth asked about the map showing Prairie-influenced properties. Should a historic district only include top architecture or can it be a collection of less significant properties?

Commissioner Eakin stated that the district includes many architectural styles which are an ensemble – there are very few masterpieces overall. Oak Park is blessed with historic architecture and a significant context and character.

Commissioner McGrath stated that the quality of the architectural ensemble is very nice. A historic district looks to preserve the overall quality of the neighborhood rather than celebrate one building over another.

Commissioner Niermann stated that the collection preserved here is important for the Village. It's an important mix. It is also good to have areas for new development.

Mr. Vanderheyden stated that he designed a new house in the historic district in an older style which fits in with the character.

Planner Kaarre noted that redevelopment can still occur on buildings or lots containing Non-Contributing Resources.

Mr. Smith stated that he hoped the expansion of the boundaries would be finished soon.

Chair Morris thanked everyone for attending.

Meeting adjourned at 8:30 p.m. Minutes prepared by Douglas Kaarre, Urban Planner.

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