

YPSILANTI HISTORIC DISTRICT FACT SHEET

ALTERNATIVE ENERGY SYSTEMS

This is one of a series of Fact Sheets provided by the Historic District Commission to assist property owners and building contractors in planning appropriate rehabilitation of structures within the Historic District.

The Historic District Commission requires that a building be maintained in its original form whenever possible. The character and historic value of a building both change whenever alterations are made and every effort shall be made to maintain the historical integrity of a building.

Your application for a Historic District Work Permit, submitted to the Building Department, will be forwarded to the Historic District Commission for review and must be approved by the Commission before work can begin. A Building Permit will likely also be required.

Historic District Work Permit applications may be obtained from the Building Department in the basement of City Hall, in the Planning and Development Department on the 4th floor of City Hall, or on the City website, www.cityofypsilanti.com.

THE FOLLOWING APPLIES TO ALL PROPERTIES IN THE HISTORIC DISTRICT

The term “alternative energy” covers a range of technologies; for example, the National Renewable Energy Laboratory conducts research into biomass, geothermal, wind, and solar power. But, practically speaking, at present (2007) the only alternative energy systems technically feasible for most properties within historic districts are solar collectors to provide heat and electrical power; therefore any specific examples given in this fact sheet will refer to solar power systems. However, the general principles of review set out here apply equally to all types of alternative energy installations.

Because modern mechanical systems were not part of the original form of structures in the historic district, and the range of potential configurations is wide, it is not possible to provide a “cookbook” type fact sheet for alternative energy installations. The purpose of the fact sheet, instead, is to summarize the general standards against which any proposal must be reviewed.

RULES THAT GOVERN HDC REVIEW

Ypsilanti’s Historical Preservation ordinance guides the decisions made by the HDC and also requires the HDC to apply the Standards for Rehabilitation established by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior when reviewing any work proposed in the district.

The Secretary’s Standards define “rehabilitation” as the “process of returning a property to a state of utility, through repair or alteration, which makes possible an efficient contemporary use while preserving those portions and features of the property which are significant to its historic, architectural, and cultural values.” In other words, both the Ypsilanti ordinance and the Secretary of the Interior Standards recognize that the long-term preservation of historic properties depends in part on the ability to adapt them to changing circumstances.

But, both sets of rules also require that any alteration be appropriate. The function of the Standards for Rehabilitation is to provide guidelines by which to determine what types and methods of repair and alteration are appropriate and permissible, and what are inappropriate.

HOW THE SECRETARY OF INTERIOR STANDARDS APPLY

Standard 2. *“The historic character of a property will be retained and preserved. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features, spaces, and spatial relationships that characterize a property will be avoided.”*

The Standards refer to “character-defining features” of a property: examples include doors, windows, porches, transoms, and the like. Both the materials and the arrangement of these features define a property’s historic character, which must not be obscured, radically changed, damaged, or destroyed in making a property more energy efficient.

Example: A business owner whose building faces south wants to install an array of solar panels. Because any significant alteration to the primary facade would obscure character-defining features, the HDC could not approve installation of the south-facing wall, and the owner would have to propose an alternative location for the solar array – e.g., on the roof.

Standard 5. *“Distinctive materials, features, finishes, and construction techniques or examples of craftsmanship that characterize a property will be preserved.”*

Example: A homeowner proposes to install solar panels on a stucco wall. HDC would be required to review the effect of the installation on the stucco finish. If the likely consequence would be to cause the finish to deteriorate, the HDC would have to deny the application.

Standard 9. *“New additions, exterior alterations, or related new construction will not destroy historic materials, features, and spatial relationships that characterize the property. The new work will be differentiated from the old and will be compatible with the historic materials, features, size, scale and proportion, and massing to protect the integrity of the property and its environment.”*

Alterations to the exterior must not be so intrusive that they destroy the integrity of the building’s character by their very presence. Repairs or alterations must not damage or destroy historic materials directly or indirectly.

Example: A business owner proposes to install a solar array on the rear wall of a building. Although the proposed installation would not obscure or damage character-defining features, and no historic material would be destroyed, it is not clear what effect the weight of the new equipment would have on the structural integrity of the wall. The HDC might then require the owner to obtain a professional structural analysis of existing physical conditions to demonstrate that the installation will do no long-term damage to the building.

Example: A homeowner proposed to install a row of solar panels on the south-facing rear roof of her house. The panels would be fixed at a 69-degree angle from the horizontal, while the roof lies at a 45-degree angle. Because the HDC must consider the effect of the proposed work on the massing of the house – that is, the outline of the building – the Commission might require that the panels be fixed at the same angle as the surface on which they are installed, even if that were not the optimal angle.

Standard 10. *“New additions and adjacent or related new construction will be undertaken in such a manner that, if removed in the future, the essential form and integrity of the historic property and its environment would be unimpaired.”*

The HDC must consider not only the details of installation of a system, but also how it will be uninstalled and what effect that would have on the physical integrity of the structure. The method of eventual removal and repair of any resulting damage to the structure shall be clearly identified in any work permit application

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Installation – attachment

The proposed method and materials for attachment shall be clearly identified in any work permit application.

Cost versus benefit

Energy conservation measures (additional insulation, weather stripping, caulking, new or repaired storm windows, etc.) are the most cost-effective methods of cutting energy costs for any property, historic or otherwise.

Although the HDC has no role to play in how an individual property owner calculates the cost versus the potential benefit of installing an alternative energy system, the HDC will consider whether the applicant has taken all available measures to achieve maximum energy efficiency.

And, because the justification for altering a historic property requires that the alteration be necessary to “[make] possible an efficient contemporary use”, the presumption must be that if a property owner has not already taken all available energy conservation measures, the proposed alteration is not necessary.

OTHER INFORMATION

The Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation are online at www.nps.gov/history

The HDC review criteria are online at www.cityofypsilanti.com/boards

Further information: e-mail hdc@cityofypsilanti.com or call the Planning & Development Department at 734-483-9646