



**2020 Annual Report
Historic District Commission and
Historic Preservation Program
Ypsilanti, Michigan**

INTRODUCTION

The Historic District Commission of the City of Ypsilanti is governed by the Michigan Local Historic Districts Act, State of Michigan Public Act 169 of 1970, and by Chapter 54 of the City of Ypsilanti Code of Ordinances. The Commission works to safeguard locally designated historic resources through review of exterior changes. City staff works on a broader historic preservation program that aims to recognize significant historic resources across the city.

MEMBERSHIP

Alex Pettit, Chair
Anne Stevenson, Vice Chair
Amy Swift
Erika Lindsay
Ronald Rupert

Hank Prebys (Resigned, end of January 2020)
James Chesnut
James Ratzlaff

COMMISSION AND STAFF

According to Sec. 54-32 of the City's Historical Preservation Ordinance, Historic preservation is declared to be a public purpose with numerous community benefits. The Historic District Commission (HDC) has several responsibilities, but chiefly, it serves as the quasi-judicial body that ensures exterior alterations of historic properties meet the Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation and local Design Criteria to protect the historic integrity of the district for future generations.

The HDC is comprised of seven members, including at least one architect or building/conservation expert, and two residents of the historic district. The HDC is staffed by the Preservation Planner, Scott Slagor and is also supported by a recording secretary, Nancy Hare-Dickerson.

Despite the challenges of 2020, the HDC continued meeting regularly on the second and fourth Tuesdays of each month at 7:00 p.m. From April through December the HDC met remotely via Zoom, just like the City's other boards and commissions. Business was completed with relatively few technical difficulties.

The turnaround time for most applications was about two weeks from submission to approval. Potential applicants are encouraged to bring projects to the HDC as study items before formal submission of an application. The study item allows the HDC to

provide feedback to property owners at a conceptual stage, clarifying expectations and allowing for a more predictable final review.

Changes in HDC Membership

In January 2020, long-time HDC member and district resident, Hank Prebys retired from service at the end of his term. Mr. Prebys had served on the HDC since May 1996. His seat was not filled until December. Due to an extended period without a full commission, three of the regularly scheduled 2020 meetings were canceled due to lack of quorum. In December the vacant seat was filled by James Ratzlaff, a district resident with an interest in the community and local history.

INITIATIVES

COVID-19 and the HDC

The HDC has managed to meet consistently through 2020 despite COVID-19. Six of the seven commissioners found it easy to use the Zoom application, while one commissioner with limited internet access was delayed in participating. Staff worked with that commissioner to assist them with participating via phone, which they did once. One meeting the phone line failed and an applicant was not able to participate, but otherwise virtual meetings have worked very well. Preservation Planner, Scott Slagor, was invited by the Michigan Historic Preservation Network to present in a training on how to conduct HDC meetings virtually, which was attended by commissioners and staff from HDCs around the state.

HDC Demolition by Neglect

In 2018, the HDC reviewed and made the determination that three properties in the historic district were in danger of demolition by neglect; 302 E Cross, 206-210 N Washington and 401 E Forest. Work to resolve the condition issues of those properties progressed in 2019, but in 2020 has stalled largely due to COVID-19. The HDC and staff had been working with the owner of 302 E Cross to have the building repaired and secured, however the property owner has not been reachable since the onset of the virus. The property at 206-210 N Washington was acquired by the City through foreclosure. The City is working on its redevelopment, which will ultimately resolve the case of demolition by neglect. The City is prepared to take legal action against the owners of 401 E Forest so that the property may be repaired, however that process has been delayed by the pandemic.

CLG Grant

In September/October, staff completed a Certified Local Government (CLG) grant for the restoration of the Tiffany Stained Glass windows of Starkweather Memorial Chapel in Highland Cemetery. The HDC reviewed a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places for the cemetery in 2019. The district was successfully listed, and the Highland Cemetery Association reached out to the City to apply for a CLG grant. If awarded, the City will receive a \$45,000 reimbursement grant for the window's restoration.

New Owner Outreach

New property owners in the historic district receive letters to welcome them to the historic district and provide a general overview of how exterior work is regulated. These new owner mailings occurred in March and September. The regularly scheduled mailings

in June and December were delayed due to the pandemic. Additionally, post cards were sent regularly to realtors who list properties in the Historic District.

Facebook updates

Staff continued utilizing the HDC’s Facebook page to do weekly “Throwback Thursday” posts utilizing old photos from City files and surveys as well as photos from the archives at the Ypsilanti Historical Society. Staff has also been utilizing the page more regularly for meeting updates and relevant preservation topics.

Historic Walking Tours

In October 2019 Preservation Planner, Scott Slagor, led walking tours of Downtown and Depot Town in partnership with the DDA to highlight historic resources in Ypsilanti’s historic commercial districts. Over the winter, he completed research for a similar tour of the West Cross area. The original plan was to hold tours monthly May through October, however due to the pandemic in-person tours were canceled for the year. In November, these tours were uploaded to the City website to make them more accessible and encourage folks to explore the DDA. Additionally, Slagor gave a virtual version of the Downtown Walking Tour to the Ypsilanti Historical Society at their October meeting.

Historic Coloring Books

Currently, Planning and DDA staff are working on coloring books to highlight some of the historically significant buildings, and remarkable transformations, in the three historic DDA districts. Logistics of producing the coloring books are still being discussed, however staff hopes to have the coloring books done by the end of winter 2021.

APPLICATIONS

The number of applications received in 2020 was significantly lower than those submitted in previous years, roughly seventy percent of the total in 2018 and 2019. The number of applications and actions taken is depicted in the table below.

One application was automatically considered approved because the HDC was not able to reach a decision in the required 60-day time frame. This was a unique circumstance where the HDC could not meet as scheduled due to lack of quorum and could not call a special meeting because the State Supreme Court has struck down the Governor’s executive order that enabled virtual meetings. To avoid this in the future, staff developed a form where an applicant can agree to extend their review period with the HDC. This “other approval” is tallied in the administrative approvals.

Historic District Commission Actions, 2016-2019

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Approved as submitted	69	73	68	60	43
Approved with modifications	14	22	11	13	4
Approved administratively	13	36	27	44	32

Amended applications	4	4	5	3	1
Denied: lack of information	1	1	1	0	0
Denied: inappropriate	5	6	3	3	3
Pending at year end	0	2	1	0	0
Notice to Proceed	0	0	5	7	7
Total Applications	106	144	124	125	90
Study Items	42	43	41	35	12

MAJOR PROJECTS in the HISTORIC DISTRICT

The Historic District continued to benefit from investment over the past year. Some of the significant projects are summarized here:

- **New Construction**

Few new buildings were approved in 2020, with the exception of new garages at 412 Oak and 322 E Forest.

- **100 W Michigan Façade Rehabilitation**

In 2019, one of the most notable changes to the district was the removal of metal cladding from 100 W Michigan (formerly Dalat Restaurant). In 2020, work began on rehabilitating the façade and east elevation to something more compatible with the building's extant historic features. It took many meetings, and study items, but eventually the HDC and developer reached an agreement on new windows and storefront treatments that would be appropriate for the building. Due to financial limitations, a full restoration could not be reached, however the ultimate result is a good example of a rehabilitation in the historic district.

- **101 W Michigan**

During 2020 work continued on the façade rehabilitation of 101 W Michigan, which is nearly completely finished. Modifications to the storefront windows had to be made because of structural limitations. The HDC worked with the property owner to ensure the modifications were compatible with the character of the building.

Demolitions

No demolitions were completed in 2020.

Appeals

No appeals were filed with the State Historic Preservation Review Board in 2020.

LOOKING FORWARD

Due to the pandemic, work in the historic district and preservation initiatives were not as robust as projected. There is uncertainty as to when the pandemic will end and its prolonged economic effects, however there are still goals to look forward to in 2021.

Visible changes should continue to take place at the major building projects as work moves to completion.

The Michigan Historic Preservation Tax Credit bill passed and was signed into law shortly before the new year. The new tax credit is expanded, allowing for both National Register and locally designated properties, which includes a much larger area of Ypsilanti. Staff plans to hold a public meeting once the process is figured out. Commissioners, staff, and many Ypsilanti residents advocated to legislators in favor of the tax credit. Both Representative Peterson and Senator Irwin voted in favor of the bill.

Goals

Staff and the HDC will continue to work toward the goals established by the State Historic Preservation Office in their 2018 Certified Local Government evaluation; including new design guidelines as applicable, continued survey of undesignated historic resources, and education opportunities. Staff will also investigate the creation of a historic district study committee to update the current district to address boundaries that do not conform to parcel lines, an updated period of significance, and updated contributing/non-contributing resources list.

To help complete these goals, staff hopes to secure funding for an intern. Work to establish an intern began in 2020, however it was suspended due to uncertainty surrounding the pandemic.

SUMMARY

Despite the challenges of virtual meetings, the HDC and property owners continued to work together. Ongoing work in the historic district despite the declining economy speaks to the vibrancy of Ypsilanti and the value its residents place in the city's historic resources. The HDC and staff will build on the achievements of 2020 in fulfilling goals for the historic preservation program in 2021.