

LITTLETON PRESERVATION WORKSHOPS

SUMMARY REPORT (AUGUST 3, 2009)

INTRODUCTION

In the winter and spring of 2009, Littleton staged a series of three public workshops related to the role of historic preservation in the community. During the course of these workshops, more than 100 people met to share ideas and craft a set of recommendations for action related to historic preservation.

The City's Historic Preservation Board and Historic Littleton, Inc. jointly sponsored these meetings. Titled, "The True Grit of Preservation," they provided a forum to discuss issues that some have had related to historic preservation and to outline actions that could help build a more effective preservation program while also taking other concerns of property owners into consideration.

Some property owners and city officials had raised questions about the role of preservation in the community and they had also questioned some of the specific details of the downtown historic district program. The workshops responded to the questions by providing a venue to raise these issues and to compare viewpoints. In the workshops, participants engaged in a set of activities that enabled them to provide comments on the role of preservation in the community.

This paper summarizes key recommendations made in the course of the three workshops, with special attention to comments provided at the final session. Also please note that some aspects of the preservation program are discussed in more detail in an accompanying paper of "Frequently Asked Questions." Additional information is provided in a set of workshop handouts that address some specific topics in more detail.

The objectives were:

- To more clearly define the role of historic preservation in the community
- To provide a forum for those interested in preservation to explore options for enhancing the program
- To also provide an opportunity for those concerned about the effects of designating historic properties to have questions answered.

THE ROLE OF PRESERVATION IN LITTLETON

Workshop participants note that historic resources enhance the quality of life for the community, and they provide a unique sense of character that distinguishes the city from others in the metropolitan region. They contribute to livability of neighborhoods and they can serve as an anchor for economic development strategies.

A list of recommended actions, based on the workshop comments, follows:

1.0 Incentives & Benefits

Effective preservation programs across the country offer special benefits for owners of historic properties, and the city has done so as well. In some communities, the incentives may include special tax benefits, regulatory relief and technical assistance. In Littleton, the city has offered incentives from time to time, including the waiver of on-site parking requirements for owners of historic buildings. Recently, however, that benefit has been extended to non-historic properties, thus diminishing the distinction in benefits available to historic properties.

Recommendations:

1.1 Conduct an analysis of potential benefits that could be offered, in order to determine those that will be most beneficial.

This study should consider the differences between residential and commercial properties. Some sample properties should be selected, and then analyses of specific benefits should be tested. These studies should include:

- Fee waivers for rehabilitation of historic buildings
- Small design assistance grants
- Energy saving retrofit assistance, including weather stripping of historic windows
- Property tax waivers (Even though this is estimated by some to be a small amount, it could be available to those who are concerned that rehabilitation will increase their property taxes.)
- Other expedited review procedures

1.2 Consider offering some benefits for being on the List of Merit.

Littleton initially recognizes properties of historic significance in a “List of Merit.” This acknowledges their importance without designating them as landmarks and thereby adding the associated level of regulation. Some basic benefits should be considered for this list. While they should not be of the same level of benefit as provided for fully landmarked resources, some assistance, or small grants may be made available.

2.0 Residential Preservation Initiatives

Many workshop participants recognize the Louthan Historic District as a success story, in terms of preservation. However, while attention has been paid to downtown historic resources, some workshop participants are concerned that residential preservation issues and opportunities may be overlooked. More neighborhoods wish to find ways to protect character and preserve resources, and therefore additional survey work, and potential district designations should be planned.

Recommendations:

2.1 Give priority for new survey work to residential neighborhoods.

Focus should be on neighborhoods that have expressed interest and where potential historic districts may be found.

2.2 Provide education programs for residential properties.

Consider staging special “how to” workshops for practical rehabilitation techniques to help owners be good stewards of their properties. Also consider developing a resource document with basic design guidelines for residential properties. This, of course, should be available on the web.

3.0 Downtown Historic District

There is some confusion about the historic district in downtown Littleton, in terms of what is regulated, which properties are eligible for being included in it and the degree of flexibility that may be available to owners. Some of these questions are addressed in the FAQ paper, which was distributed at Workshop #3.

The downtown historic district is different from most, because it does not officially include all properties of historic significance. It essentially functions as a “Conservation District,” or a “multiple property listing.” In a conservation district, individual historic resources may be protected, but the focus is on compatibility of new construction. Since the downtown design guidelines do address some concepts of compatibility based on context, they resemble the effects of a conservation district. The downtown district is likely to continue to operate this way, and if it does, its structure needs to be more clearly defined.

Recommendations:

3.1 Refine the boundary of the historic district.

Generally, a historic district boundary defines the area in which a general sense of place and historic setting can be experienced. Refining the boundary could help to identify the range of properties that would be desirable to have included as landmarks, such that property owners would know that they could be eligible for being added into the district, using the current “opt in” method. It would also more clearly define the context for considering the compatibility of new construction as it relates to historic properties.

3.2 Articulate the benefits of being listed as a contributor of historic significance.

During the course of the workshops, a variety of benefits were identified. Some of these are listed on the city’s website, but a more detailed description would be beneficial.

3.3 Define how properties that do not have historic significance can be included as properties in the district.

Some confusion exists about how a non-contributing property can be in a historic district. Typically, they are included, but any design review is conducted using guidelines for compatible new construction, not the preservation-oriented guidelines. Perhaps a category of “supporting” properties could be established. Design objectives for these properties would be similar to those for new construction within the district. The manner in which incentives apply to these properties also would be discussed.

3.4 Evaluate the existing downtown design guidelines for their relationship to historic preservation.

The existing guidelines acknowledge the downtown historic district, and they do provide some basic principles for treatment of historic structures, but design review of landmark properties is intended to occur using the city's other preservation criteria. The existing downtown design guidelines are divided into a series of sub-areas. One of these, Area 5, contains most of the historic district properties.

3.5 Consider how a TIF or BID district could promote preservation.

Discussions have occurred about creating a TIF or BID to support a variety of improvements in the downtown. Any such improvement district should be planned with preservation as a distinct objective. In this way, certain funds should be earmarked for rehabilitation of historic properties.

4.0 Design Guidelines

Design guidelines for the treatment of historic properties are needed that are specifically tailored to Littleton. These should address residential and commercial buildings, and they should be written such that they can be used in the city's formal design review process, but also to serve as a helpful resource for owners of properties with historic value throughout the city, even those not formally designated.

These guidelines also should be written to help address some of the concerns, and even "myths," that exist related to preservation. In that regard, they should clearly define the range of options that owners may have related to their properties, and focus on providing solutions to problems that owners typically face. The guidelines also should address sustainability and dealing with building codes.

5.0 Education & Technical Assistance Programs

The city should actively engage in a series of educational programs that promote preservation. A key activity is to conduct some "how to" workshops for owners of historic buildings, specifically related to energy conservation. Other workshops could address techniques for

researching the history of a property and for planning basic improvements. This is a good opportunity to partner with Historic Littleton, Inc.

6.0 Surveys

The city should expand the range of properties surveyed for historic significance. They also should address:

- Recent past properties
- Descriptions of the key features of the property that should be preserved
- Definition of the relevant period of significance

7.0 Period of Significance

As a part of the refinement of a city survey system, the city should define a period of significance for each of its historic districts. This would help to clarify in the downtown areas, for example, which properties are of significance. This would help in considering how non-contributing properties relate to a district as well.

CITY OF LITTLETON PRESERVATION PROGRAM

Supplemental Documents

These documents also were provided during the course of the workshops:

1. Workshop #1 Activity Sheets
2. Powerpoint show for Workshop #1
3. Workshop #2 Activity Sheets
4. Powerpoint show for Workshop #2
5. Powerpoint show for Workshop #3
6. Workshop #1 Summary Comments
7. Workshop #2 Summary Comments
8. Handout for Workshop #3: Frequently Asked Questions
9. Sample flow charts for use in historic preservation design guidelines