

Rockford Historic Preservation Commission 2009 Annual Report

During 2009, the Rockford Historic Preservation Commission continued in its usual role of reviewing renovation work in local historic districts and landmarks, as well as commenting on applications for a new local historic district and an entry onto the National Register of Historic Places. However, it also published a report showing the economic benefits of local designation and tracked two on-going violations throughout the year. Specific Commission activities over the past year included:

- ♦ Review of 29 requests for Certificates of Appropriateness;
- ♦ Public hearing and review of one nomination to the National Register of Historic Places;
- ♦ Public hearing and recommendation to City Council of a new local historic district;
- ♦ Publication of a booklet showing the positive economic impact of being in a local historic district;
- ♦ Continued to seek compliance in two violation cases; and
- ♦ Presentation at the 2009 CLG Workshop on Rockford's requirements for local designation.

Here in more detail is our year in review.

Cases Reviewed

Rockford's Historic Preservation Ordinance requires that a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) be issued by the Preservation Commission before any changes may be made to the exterior of locally designated properties. Of the 29 applications for Certificates submitted to the Commission in 2009, 25 were approved, 1 was denied, 2 laid over and 1 withdrawn. The one denial was for an application to allow an owner to retain three metal doors that had been installed without benefit of a COA, replacing wood doors. Of the 29 applications, 9 were from Brown's Hills/Knightsville. 1 from Garfield Avenue, 7 from Haight Village, 2 from Indian Terrace, and the remaining 6 for individual landmark sites. Here are highlights on a few of the applications reviewed by the Commission.

Burpee Museum of Natural History The two original mansions that form the core of the Burpee Museum of Natural History were designated as local landmarks in 1983. The first major addition – the Solem Addition – was built in 1997. The Museum applied for a COA for a second major addition in 2009 that would connect their facility with the Discovery Center Museum next door in Riverfront Museum Park. While an underground tunnel already served to connect the two facilities, this new addition will provide an above-ground connection. Major concerns for the Commission included the sheer size of the addition (see site plan below) and its appearance from Main Street (IL Rote 2). While the addition is larger than the original mansion, it is set back to the rear of the house, and is smaller than the Solem Addition. The original proposal showed a blank wall on the west elevation (facing Main Street). This was modified to incorporate two elements carried over from the earlier addition – banding and a large window that will allow light into a stairwell without compromising any exhibits in the Museum. With these changes, the Commission approved the application for the addition.

403 Elm Street The sole remaining part of the historic components of Winnebago County's Courthouse Square, 403 Elm Street was built as an annex to a previous Courthouse in 1916-1917. The east elevation had been largely hidden from view because of a newer County building at 401 Elm Street. When 401 was demolished in 2009 to make way for a park, a walkway that had connected it to the landmark property at 403 was also taken down. This left a seriously compromised view of the older building. To remedy this, the County asked to replace this section of the east façade with windows matching those that had been installed on the building's other south (front) façade earlier.



Lincoln Middle School & East High School Rockford Public Schools submitted applications for new marquee signs in front of both of these schools on Charles Street. While the size and, in one case, the physical base were not changed, the basic signs themselves were changed to a digital format. While digital signs would not conform to the Commission's design guidelines, the unique circumstances posed by active schools and the need for the School system to communicate with parents in as many ways as possible led to approval of both applications.

Local Designations

The Commission received an application for one new local historic district in 2009, the Peacock Brewery Historic District. Consisting of just two parcels, the new district includes the original brewery building and the Brew Master's house. The brewery started in 1849 in the Brew Master's house at the corner of Prairie Avenue and North Madison Street. The house itself was built in 1845-46, making it one of the oldest structures in the City of Rockford. Plans are underway to redevelop the property as a mixed use, taking full advantage of both its historic character and its location on Rockford's near-downtown riverfront.



While this was the only formal application for local designation, the Commission was also approached by an individual interested in pursuing local historic district designation in two new areas – around Garrison School and in the Coronado Haskell neighborhood (around the Valencia Apartments). His feeling was that local designation had made the critical difference in redevelopment of the Haight Village Historic District and it could do the same in these two neighborhoods. We anticipate applications for one or both of these areas in 2010.

Surveys

No new areas were surveyed in 2009, although Commission staff did make some progress in updating survey materials from the Mid Town North neighborhood. This work should be completed in the first half of 2010. Several options have been discussed as potential survey areas for the coming year, but no decision has been made as yet.

Monitoring



The Commission reviewed the nomination of the Valencia Apartments, located at 500-518 Fisher Avenue), to the National Register of Historic Places. The Valencia complex includes four structures designed by local architect Jesse Barloga in 1927-28. The buildings show numerous characteristics of Spanish Revival architecture and are surprisingly intact. The Valencia Apartments were listed on the National Register in December 2009 and are undergoing certified rehabilitation.

Although Rockford's application to use a CLG grant to carry out Phase I and Phase II environmental assessments of the former National Guard Armory building was approved, clearance to tap into the money was not given until the end of the year. Consequently, this work will not be done until the first half of 2010.

Commission staff continued to monitor proposals for redevelopment of properties already listed on the National Register, primarily the Barber-Colman Industrial Complex. As part of this process, a Memorandum of Agreement between the City and IHPA was signed in late 2009 covering proposed demolition of three specified buildings on the site. Implementation of various aspects of the MOA carries forward into 2010.

The Commission's 2008 Annual Report reported concerns over at least two of Rockford's National Register sites. Both have been vacant for some time, and are likely to remain so under current economic conditions. Those concerns remain for the Elks Club building and for the Midway Theatre, both pictured below. HPC staff and the City of Rockford's Commercial Development Manager talked with representatives of both Landmark Illinois and the Chicago office of the National Trust for Historic Preservation regarding the Midway but were unable to come up with any firm solutions. It has been listed on Landmark Illinois' listed of available and imperiled buildings. While new owners for the theater have come forward, there is still no clear path to renovating the Midway.



Other Commission Activities

Economic Impact of Local Designation The Preservation Commission received a CLG grant in 2008 from IHPA to pay for preparation and publication of a booklet exploring the economic impact of local designation. This was partly in response to many complaints that local designation (and the mandatory design review that comes with it) adversely affects property values. During 2008, the Commission staff with assistance from a Planning intern outlined areas that were considered to be comparable to the four residential historic districts 30 years ago when Rockford's preservation ordinance was adopted. By comparing assessed values, sale prices and owner occupancy rates over the past 30 years for our four residential districts with comparable neighborhoods, we found that historic districts performed better overall. For example, average sale prices for single-family homes increased by between 221% and 469% in the districts while the neighborhoods they were compared with showed increases of 154% to 388%. City staff was ably aided in this effort by staff of the Rockford Area Economic Development Council which took the raw document and formatted it into a finished product. This final product was published in early 2009, with its release being announced at a press conference of Mayor Lawrence Morrissey. Since then, the report has been posted on the City of Rockford website, mailed to owners of all locally designated properties, distributed at a statewide conference, and distributed in various other venues.



Violations The Commission faced two major instances of failure to provide minimum maintenance as required by ordinance during 2009. Both cases began in 2008; one has been resolved while some issues remain on the second. The case that has been resolved involved the renovation of 904 North Prospect Street in the Brown's Hills/Knightsville Historic District. At the end of 2008, it had been stripped of its asbestos siding and sat as an eyesore within the district for some months. After the Commission brought suit against the owner in court, all outstanding issues involving minimum maintenance were taken care of and the suit dismissed.



The case that has still not been closed out involved five houses in the 400 block of Kishwaukee Street, part of the Haight Village Historic District. These were acquired by a new owner as part of a package deal that included roughly 50 other properties. These were the only ones in a historic district. All were in very poor condition and clearly needed major work, as "before and after" photos on the next page show.

401 Kishwaukee



407 Kishwaukee



409-411
Kishwaukee



415 Kishwaukee



417 Kishwaukee



The improvement of these properties was considered critical, not just for the sake of the buildings directly involved, but also for Haight Village as a whole since these homes lie on a major arterial (IL Route 251) that forms its eastern border. By working hand-in-hand with Rockford's code enforcement team, major cosmetic improvements have been made. Additional work, such as stabilizing foundations and restoring porches, remains to be done. At present, the owner faces a fine of nearly \$20,000 from the City's Administrative Hearing Officer. It is the Commission's hope that remaining issues can be resolved in 2010 and these homes become a solid entry point for the Haight Village Historic District.

Training in 2009 Ginny Gregory attended the 2009 CLG Workshop in September 2009. A copy of her presentation (Landmark and Historic District Designation in Rockford) is included in the attachments.

Commission Members as of January 2010

Janna Bailey (Member of a historical society)

Maureen Flanagan (Open position)

Ald. Doug Mark (Member of City Council)

Vickie Krueger (Realtor)

Scott Sanders (Landscape architect)

Mark McInnis (Resident of a local historic district)

David Hagney (Licensed architect)