

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

INFILL & PROTECTING FOREST GROVE'S HISTORIC DISTRICTS

A Perspective by Neil Poulsen, HLB Chair

Forest Grove is one of the earliest settled communities in the state of Oregon. Of the four National Historic Districts in Washington County, three are located in Forest Grove. They make an inestimable contribution to the character and charm of the community. It's an environment that enhances the quality of life for every Forest Grove citizen. And, as economic development consultant Michelle Reeves points out in her recent presentations, it can be leveraged to improve Forest Grove's economic vitality. By protecting these districts, we protect Forest Grove.

This raises the question of how might our historic districts be vulnerable? The core issue of their vulnerability is how we handle infill. Infill is the use of vacant land for new construction or development. Historic districts can be fragile things. If a historic district has too many detriments, it loses its effectiveness. There's a difference between a historic district that contributes to our cultural environment and quality of life, and a collection of interspersed, nice properties. It's about protecting the district, and not just the individual properties.

Infill occurs in a variety of ways. There are multiple vacant lots within the districts; they can be sold and developed. Oversized lots become attractive for new construction. A building is torn down or unfortunately burns to the ground and makes land available. A series of smaller properties can be purchased and replaced by a dwelling that's completely out of scale with surrounding properties. A historic district incurs a severe and irreparable injury when a contributing structure

is torn down to make land available. The list, and the vulnerability, goes on. As it stands, the City of Forest Grove has no legal means to protect our community from any of these vulnerabilities!

Consider the following example of infill in north Forest Grove. It's a single-family home. A fire destroyed the previous structure on this property.



Example 1, photo by Neil Poulsen

Clearly, someone has created a structure that would be suitable for a large family. How would it compare to its neighbors, were it located at the core of the Walker-Naylor Historic District? It's two-and-a-half stories tall, whereas its neighbors would be, at most, two-stories tall. Many are one-story tall. Its setback is fairly short, perhaps necessitated by the size of the structure. This is quite different from the setback of many nearby historic homes. The scale and proportions are clearly different from its neighbors. This building appears to be a modern, well-built structure that has characteristics

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of an arts and crafts architectural style. But it's not the type of structure that would complement the core area of one of our historic districts.

So, how can the City guide infill in a historic district, and still achieve a win-win result for both the community and the property owner? One approach (example) that is sure to fail is style-centric.

"New construction in an existing historic district shall be in one of the following architectural styles: *Queen Anne, Foursquare, Stick Victorian, or Colonial Revival.*"

This method attempts to guide infill by dictating architectural styles.

But, the appeal of new construction is that a property owner can design a home that satisfies their unique needs in both function and appearance.

A better method is the opposite of a style-centric approach. It exerts influence primarily through other design elements that can be more objectively defined and evaluated. These can include scale and proportion, setback, height, materials, or lot size. Place reasonable limits on these design elements, and much has been accomplished towards ensuring that new construction will complement a given historic district. Of course, zoning ordinances must permit these design elements to be set differently for historic districts than would otherwise be the case elsewhere in the city.

That's not to say that architectural style in a historic district isn't important; it surely is. But there can be architectural styles outside the period of significance (for example) that can nicely complement a given historic district as infill. Let the property owner select styles early in the design phase that they believe will complement the district. Then, let them schedule a conceptual review with a flexibly-minded Historic Landmarks Board, where the goal for all is to concur on a style that meets the owners' needs, yet will also complement the district. The role of the HLB isn't to enforce their beliefs of what will complement the district. It's to avoid designs that could jeopardize the district. The fact that no a-priori limits have been placed on architectural styles makes it all the more likely that this can

occur. Hopefully, an owner that wishes to build in a historic district will be motivated to select an architectural style that complements the area.

The author maintains that an approach like the one described above which does not rely on architectural style-centric strategies to guide infill in historic districts will provide ample flexibility for owners to design and build properties that will meet their unique needs.

In fact, there's a large faction within the preservation community that believes infill should necessarily be differentiated from existing historic properties. This can be through construction, use of differing materials, signage, or other means. But of course, this same faction urges that this differentiation should not be to the extent that it visually distracts from, or competes with, neighboring historic properties. Frankly, the author finds this philosophy to be elitist. Its logical outcome is that only owners of historic properties have the "right" to possess structures that appear historic, or that faithfully follow the designs of period architectural styles. Nonsense! The author shouts, more power to them! Of course, some differentiation of new construction is likely to occur under any circumstances, since it must conform to codes not in place during the period of significance.

After considering an example that detracts from the Walker-Naylor Historic District, let's consider a positive example of infill that's located in south Forest Grove.



Example 2, photo by Neil Poulsen

This house is clearly of modern construction yet it has lines that are a reminder of a Stick Victorian architectural style. The building has setback, height, scale, and proportions that are similar to those of contributing structures on either side. The landscaping is outstanding. This property is located in the Painter's Woods Historic District and definitely complements the surrounding properties. It's absolutely beautiful.

Since the mid-1990s the Historic Landmarks Board has directed its efforts towards successfully listing three historic districts on the National Register. This was a huge undertaking that

required years of dedicated time on the part of Board members, consultants, and city planners.

But now it's time to take steps to protect what we've worked so hard to accomplish. In the coming year, we'll be working with the Planning Commission, City staff and the City Council to define a process by which we can effectively guide the use of infill that will be a win-win for owners, for the historic districts, and for the Forest Grove community. If you have comments, input, or questions, please let us know.

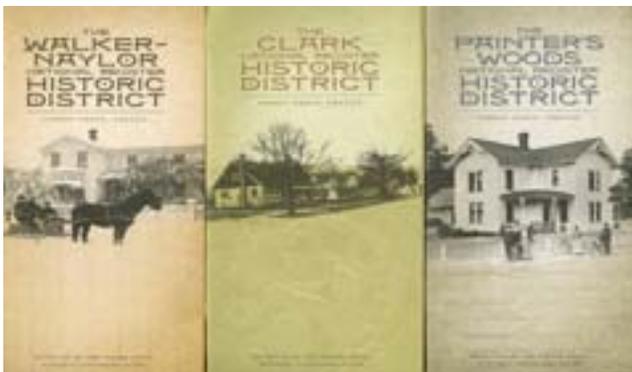
New Historic District Brochures and Signs

The Landmarks Board recently completed two major projects, the creation of brochures for the Walker-Naylor and Painter's Woods districts, and "sign toppers" to identify the major intersections of each district.

The brochures were designed to be compatible with the existing Clark District brochure, so now all three historic districts are documented. Copies are available at the City offices in the Planning Department, as well as the Chamber of Commerce.

The sign toppers complement the ones that were done for the Clark District, and have different colors.

Money for these projects was provided by the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), for which we are very thankful.



All photos by Neil Poulsen

\$\$ MONEY FOR PRESERVATION \$\$

Is your house on our local historic register, or a contributing building in one of the historic districts? If it is, did you know that your house may be eligible for restoration / rehabilitation grant funding? The Historic Landmarks Board has funds now to help you with your projects. If you are planning any exterior restoration work such as restoring architectural features, have structural work to do such as foundation or porch repairs, even exterior painting or re-roofing, we'd love to help. We fund projects up to 50% of the cost of the job per grant, up to \$1,000 (less for painting and roofing). We can also help you find historically appropriate solutions to challenges you may have. Contact James Reitz at 503-992-3233 or jreitz@forestgrove-or.gov to explore the possibilities.

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Preserving Forest Grove is a quarterly newsletter published by the Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board to help fulfill its duty of public education regarding the preservation of cultural resources. If you would like to be on the mailing list, please call James Reitz at 503-992-3233, or jreitz@forestgrove-or.gov.

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In this Issue:

Infill and Protecting Forest Grove's Historic Districts

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