

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

Historic District Design Guidelines: What Do You Think?

By Claude Romig

Fran lives in a lovely, old historic house in her town's Historic District. She likes living in the District; there's a certain amount of pride associated with being a part of such a nice, well established neighborhood. Not only that, her and her neighbors' property values have increased at a rate significantly greater than the property values of her fellow citizens who live across town.

Fran's next door neighbor has decided to make an addition to his historic house. Fran has seen the plans and noticed that her neighbor's front porch will be partially demolished to accommodate the new expanded living room. In addition, the front yard will be reduced by about half. The addition is quite large and will overwhelm the existing house. Architecturally, it is totally out of character. Fran has become worried. Can he do this?

The plans for the addition are brought before the City Council for review. Guidelines recently established by the city to regulate construction within a Historic District suggest that, "Additions should be made to the rear of the building if possible. Occasionally a side ell



A. G. Hoffman House in 1905. Photo provided by Friends of Historic Forest Grove

may be an appropriate addition. No addition should overwhelm the scale of the building. The additional space should be both compatible in design, but distinguishable from the original portion of the building. Compatible materials and construction techniques should be considered. Additions should be made so that if the addition

ever were to be removed, there is minimal damage to the original structure.”

Following the City Council’s review, the building permit was denied. It was recommended that the project be reevaluated in light of the Historic District construction guidelines and submitted again at a later date. Though she has always had a great relationship with her neighbor, Fran breathed a sigh of relief.

Though imaginary, this scene could well be played out in the

city of Forest Grove, but with very different results. At the moment, there is a rudimentary set of guidelines relating to construction within a Historic District; Fran’s neighbor can do whatever he wants to his house. But is this the best answer for Forest Grove, and in particular, for Fran and for her neighbors? This is an issue the Historic Landmarks Board is now beginning to consider.

Cities across the country have been debating the merits of drafting historic design guidelines. The debate focuses on individual property rights versus the public interest at large. The question is, what constitutes the middle ground that exists between private property rights and the public interest? The answer seems to be that citizens of each city must decide for themselves what is best.

Littleton, Colorado found their middle ground. Littleton was incorporated in 1890 and has a population approximately twice the size of Forest Grove’s. City leaders believe that economic

development involves “slow, painstaking community development with an eye on the innovators” and strongly encourages small

businesses. The Littleton Main Street Historic District was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1998.

Littleton recognized in 2001 that “Historic district zoning is frequently controversial, but it almost always has a beneficial effect on property values, commercial revitalization,



A. G. Hoffman House in 2007: An excellent example of Historic Preservation.

business investments and increased tourism.” (This was the finding of a wide ranging 1995 study by the Preservation Alliance of Virginia.)

Littleton felt strongly enough about preserving its unique historic character that the town moved to turn its Historic District guidelines into law; they wanted something with teeth. The citizens of Littleton stated that “The protection, enhancement, perpetuation and use of buildings...that are reminders of past eras...or which provide significant examples of architectural styles of the past, or which are unique and irreplaceable assets to the city and its neighborhoods, or which provide for this and future generations examples of the physical surroundings in which past generations lived...” was critical to their city’s future.

They decided that to preserve Littleton’s unique historic character and culture they would not try to preserve every old building

in the city, but "rather prevent the destruction of historic and architecturally significant sites, buildings, structures, neighborhoods and districts by restricting the use of land and the moving, demolition, reconstruction, restoration or alteration of such buildings, sites and structures." Such sites would be reviewed and issued (or not) a certificate of historic appropriateness.

To create some teeth for the new laws they decided that, "Alterations to a designated historic landmark or historic landmark district without an approved certificate of historic appropriateness will result in a one year moratorium on all building permits for the subject property." In addition, "Moving or demolishing or allowing demolition by neglect of a designated structure without an approved certificate of historic appropriateness will result in a five year moratorium on all moving, demolition, or building permits for the structure and for the property at the structure's original location." It has been six years since Littleton enacted their Historic District code. Their commitment to historical preservation remains strong today.

The time has come for Forest Grove's citizens to begin thinking about the future of their historic neighborhoods. The timeline for this conversation is significant in light of the possibility of a new light rail line coming to Forest Grove. Possible routes might pass through at least one historic neighborhood. What will happen to those historic structures that are in the path of the light rail line? Will the businesses that will inevitably be attracted to the area be able to indiscriminately alter or demolish historic buildings? How will this change Forest Grove's feel and historic dynamic? We as citizens need to develop a process to monitor and manage these events.

The Historic Landmarks Board is in the process of drafting a set of guidelines pertaining to construction within a historic district. These guidelines should reflect the community's desire to preserve and maintain its historic buildings as closely as possible to their original state. From the dozens of guideline examples culled from other cities' documents and city codes, five

distinct categories emerged:

1. Maintain the architectural design, pattern and details of the original construction and site.
2. Maintain the original materials of the original building(s) and their construction.
3. Maintain the original colors, or use colors that are consistent with the original architectural concepts of the building(s) and site.
4. Adopt landscaping and grounds characteristics that are consistent with the original architecture of the building and site.
5. Avoid new construction or additions to the site, or include them in a way that they aren't visible from the front.

Within each category are included many examples and illustrations of appropriate and inappropriate renovation. Once the Guidelines Draft document has been completed, the intention is that it be sent to a large group of Forest Grove citizens for evaluation. Questions will be asked, such as, "Which guidelines are appropriate? Which are not? Will these guidelines be adequate to maintain our historic neighborhoods in the way we would like them to be maintained? How do you see Forest Grove's future in relation to its historic past?"

We as citizens have the right and the power to decide how our neighborhoods will look and feel in the future. Again, from Littleton's city code, "The enhancement of property values, the stabilization of neighborhoods and areas of the city, the increase of economic and financial benefits to the city and its inhabitants, and the promotion of tourist trade and interest" are all results of cohesive neighborhoods in which people feel pride and a sense of place. People just like Fran.

Your feedback is essential. What do you think? How do you feel about Historic District Guidelines? Email your comments to jonstagnitti@johnlscott.com.

The Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board Grant Program

Is your house on our local register? If it is, did you know that your house is eligible for restoration / rehabilitation grant funding? The Historic Landmarks Board has funds to help you with your projects. If you are planning any exterior restoration work such as restoring architectural features or if you have structural work to do such a foundation repair, we'd love to help. We fund projects up to 50% of the cost of the job per grant. Come see us! We can also help you find historically appropriate solutions to any problems you may have.

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