

Historic Preservation Review Board – April 14, 2007 @ 9:00 AM

The Historic Preservation Review Board held a board training session in the upstairs conference room of the San Juan County Courthouse.

Former Historic Preservation Coordinator Nancy Larsen presented materials relating to the history of the program, how the HP manual was created, design review and the broader vision of Historic Preservation in Friday Harbor.

Members present: Mary Jane Anderson, Chair; Gary Franklin, Kevin Peterson, Michael Jean Carpentier and David Waldron

Also Present: Sandy Strehlou, HPRB Coordinator; Liz Illg, member Town Council

Introduction

Reasons to hold this board training were stated as, updating new members to the history of the Historic Preservation Review Board, the Historic Preservation Manual and renewing the larger vision and purpose of the Historic Preservation Review Board. The first part of the meeting was devoted to the history of the program and the second part addressed issues concerning the HP manual.

Ms. Larsen cautioned that boards that do not make an effort to renew their vision succumb to narrow thinking over time. She stressed the importance of communication and understanding of goals to maintaining the bigger picture while dealing with the constant attention to details required of design reviews. She encouraged the board to make time for retreats and self-evaluation.

Ms. Larsen read excerpts from, *The Lost Year: Behind the Failure to rebuild: Letter From New Orleans*, by Dan Baum, New Yorker Magazine, August 21, 2006. Larsen quoted Kenneth Reardon, the chairman of the Department of City and Regional Planning at Cornell. Mr. Reardon helped coordinate data on the condition of New Orleans gathered by teams from seventeen universities. "The first rule is: Survey before plan. The whole process should be driven by data, and people's preferences, and in reality."

Program History

Nancy Larsen related the early formation of the historic preservation program in Friday Harbor starting with her early work as a reporter for *The Island Record* attending Town Council meetings. In the late 1980s early 1990s Ms. Larsen along with John Dustrude and Harry Towne took note of the incoherent nature of development in Friday Harbor. An attempt to interest the Town of Friday Harbor in a Main Street Program was unsuccessful. Early discussions regarding preservation of the County Courthouse were at odds with the board of the Historical Museum.

Larsen traveled to Olympia to visit to Office of Architecture and Historic Preservation. She joined Board of Directors of the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation and made contacts while on the executive committee. She began going to the planning commission around 1990. People in Friday Harbor had reservations about historic preservation including fears of restrictions on their property.

Memorial Park was an early success in preservation in Friday Harbor. The project received good press from both the *Island's Sounder* and the *Journal of the San Juan's*. Larsen Ms. Larsen spoke to Friday Harbor Town Council about historic preservation. An early attempt to adopt an element of historic preservation into the GMA failed. Eventually with more development in town that people did not like public opinion shifted. Community members Al Nash, Edith Dickenson and Jim Cahail supported historic preservation. Clear from the beginning that Friday Harbor's program would be voluntary the Historic Preservation Review Board was created in 1998.

The first task of the new board was to create an inventory. The inventory created at that time reflects the budgetary restrictions of the time. Ms. Larsen and Board members documented structures from the era between the 1890s and 1925 based on three criteria: site, architecture (most vernacular), and representation of broader patterns of community and historic significance.

Due to the fact that the history of the town was not well recorded Ms. Larsen gathered information from by driving to sites with older local folk and collecting their stories. In four years, with assistance from High School and Collage students, the inventory as we know it was created. Photographs are black & white because that is what will last. With new members elected to the Town Council the voluntary incentive program was passed with a 3 to 2 vote. Opposition was based on fear of regulations. With input from planning and the community Larsen then proposed a historic district. Here Larsen stressed the point that "All preservation is local" and quoted Theodore Roosevelt who said; "Do what you can with what you've got where you are".

The Harvard Business School recommends 5 to 7 people to make a board work. The initial members of the board formed in 1998 were Sam Pope, Mona Meeker, Nancy Jones and David Waldron. Ms. Larsen was the Coordinator, Debbie Sandwith was the recording secretary and Scott Zehner participated as an interested citizen (later Zehner joined the board).

In Friday Harbor high property values in relation to the perceived value of historic structures is an economic reality. Ms. Larsen stressed the importance of incentives to making the program work. It is only through incentives that the program becomes mandatory.

Larsen noted that Historic Preservation is inherently conservative as it seeks to preserve what is. Historic Preservation is about people. It was quoted that “people grow accustomed to the geometry in which they live”. The influx of new people who are unfamiliar with Island geometry is yet another challenge for local preservation efforts and points to the importance of education starting with educating ourselves as to historic value.

Pages 10 – 14 of the Historic Preservation Manual outline the job of the Historic Preservation Review Board.

The Historic Preservation Manual

Town Council budgeted funds to create the Historic Preservation Manual. Keeping in mind that all preservation is local it can be helpful to look at what other communities have done. Cape Cod guidelines are very strict. Eastsound has a simple set of rules and referred to our manual in developing their guidelines.

Regarding Friday Harbor’s current influx of mixed-used development contacting developers as early as possible is recommended.

The methodology used in creating the manual was grounded in our own history, defining the character and integrity of Friday Harbor’s neighborhoods. Early Friday Harbor was a port, a commercial district and a working town. Goods (farm products and lumber) were brought into Friday Harbor on smaller boats and shipped out on steamers. Farm animals were driven down Spring Street to the Port. Memorial Park is shaped the way it is to facilitate a horse and wagon turn around.

The purpose of the manual is to educate people in a user friendly way. It was constructed by a collaborative approach. It was not intended to create a “theme” town or “cookie cutter” approach but to allow for creativity while honoring the towns predominate historic character. The pressure to complete it quickly determined some decision-making. The manual tried to accommodate different approaches with imagery, bullet points and writing. Town Council hired Boyd Pratt, architectural historian, to critique the manual. It won awards and has been widely utilized and praised. Some people thought that the project would fail but David Waldron, one of the original board members, commented that he was initially surprised by how quickly people saw the value of the manual. Town Council passed the incentive program with a 2 to 3 vote with the caveat that the incentives be “revenue neutral” not costing the town any money.

Once the manual was complete Historic Preservation in Friday Harbor “hit the ground running” by preserving Memorial Park.

Initial fears held by some townspeople were abated by the outreach and educational efforts of the original board. The operating style of board was to reach decisions by consensus, seek design solutions, and research facts, to be helpful to people. The board has a role in helping people think creatively.

Ms. Larsen advised use of Sandborn fire insurance maps and photographs when researching areas such as the waterfront. She suggested an alternative to enlarging the historic district would be to evaluate historic structures outside of the historic district and get them on the historic register. She cautioned if the board goes regulatory (not voluntary) guidelines must be based on reality and must be able to hold up in court.

Next year Friday Harbor's Historic Preservation Board will be 10 years old. In 2009 Friday Harbor will celebrate it's centennial. These milestones present opportunities for the board to engage with other entities within the town. Ms. Larsen recommended attending Town Council meetings and being in agreement beforehand as to what will be said (no surprises) by the board. She advised working with land use regulations and meeting with the Port. She acknowledged that the amount of work to do could seem overwhelming and cautioned against "Death by 1,000 issues". She suggested having renewing retreats and morning work meetings.

12:05 Gary Franklin departed

Current priorities include updating both the incentives and the manual. David Waldron suggested a meeting such as this when the board is ready to start work on the manual.

12:15 meeting adjourned

Recommended Reading

Guide to Making Review Decisions (in handouts for this board training)
A Pattern Language by Christopher Alexander
A Field Guide to American Houses by Virginia McAlester and Lee McAlester
Urban Geographer by William White
Life and Death of American Cities by Jane Jacobs

Mary Jane Anderson, Chair

Peggy Sue McRae
12:15 PM Meeting adjourned