

Historic District Council of the City of Fernandina Beach

REPORT OF THE CHAIR

September 22, 2009

Summary

The Historic District Council (HDC) continues to work diligently with city staff to improve operations and communications, streamline procedures and explore options for additional tax relief for Historic District property owners.

Improved Operations and Communications

On the agenda for approval at the October HDC meeting is the final draft of an administrative procedures manual. This document has been in preparation for approximately two years and provides guidance to HDC members on administrative matters such as the role of committee members and officers and conduct of meetings. It may be found on the HDC portion of the city's website (<http://www.fbfl.us/hdc>). Thanks to the diligence and initiative of the Planning Staff, the city's website has become an excellent and free source for many documents such as design guidelines, various project reports and historic district news items (<http://www.fbfl.us/historicdistrict>).

Streamlining Procedures

Always mindful of the need to simplify procedures and keep costs under control, the HDC has been working with staff to better define circumstances and types of actions that require HDC hearings as opposed to those that may be approved by staff without compromising the integrity of the Historic District. Staff approvals may be obtained more quickly and at a lower cost to the applicant. And of course, the applicant may always appeal a staff decision to the HDC. The HDC is currently reviewing a matrix prepared by staff which is available to the public for review and comment on the city's website (<http://www.fbfl.us/hdc>). This matrix will be discussed on the HDC's October 22nd agenda.

After approval of the matrix by the HDC, the matrix will then be presented to the Planning Advisory Board as a text amendment to the Land Development Code to supplant the existing procedures outlined in Sections 11.03.09(B) and (C) regarding staff versus Board approval. Provided the Planning Advisory Board accepts the proposed changes, the change will then be presented to the Commission for adoption into the Land Development Code. When this matrix is formally adopted, it will also be added to the administrative procedures manual. The HDC has also been working with staff on creation of a historic preservation element to be added to the comprehensive plan, as recommended by the EAR, and a new historic preservation ordinance to follow on the adoption of the EAR amendments currently in the pipeline. This ordinance will further clarify which property improvements need city and/or HDC approval, streamline historic district references in the Land Development Code, and address topics currently not fully addressed such as demolition by neglect, post-disaster planning, and archaeological resources.

Tax Relief for Historic District Property Owners

In summer 2007, the city-commissioned resurvey of the Historic District was presented to the Historic District Council along with several related recommendations for improving the health of the Historic District. One of those recommendations dealt with federal financial incentives and programs; another with state incentives and programs. City staff is currently investigating the experiences of other Florida communities with regard to implementing local legislation, as permitted by state law, that offers short-term property tax abatement to property owners who rehabilitate certified historic buildings. While the HDC has taken no formal action on this matter, members agree in principle with the concept of providing both information and reasonable means to allow Historic District property owners to seek tax relief. The HDC will respond appropriately with advice and recommendations to the City Commission, should the Commission direct staff to draft a local enabling ordinance.

Other

1. **Old Town's Upcoming 200th Anniversary.** The year 2011 marks the 200th anniversary of the platting of Fernandina, the last Spanish-platted city in the Western Hemisphere. This anniversary coincides with a major Florida initiative to celebrate the influence of the Spanish in Florida. The King and Queen of Spain will be visiting Florida as part of this commemoration. The Amelia Island Museum of History has asked Professor Bill Tilson to head up an effort to highlight Old Town's anniversary as one of the important aspects of Florida's Spanish history.
2. **Historic District Trust Fund.** While the HDC has officially requested a reactivation of this fund, along with a revenue stream, there has been no response with respect to the FY2010 Budget.
3. **Preserve America Application.** The City formally transmitted the Preserve America Community Designation application on August 6, 2009. The review deadline for this cycle was September 1st, and the City should be receiving word on the status of the application in the near future.
4. The Amelia Island Museum of History, which is located just outside the Historic District, has applied for National Register listing. The request has been approved by the state and now awaits action by the National Parks Service. In the meantime, a new exhibit, highlighting the building's history as the Nassau County Jail, will open in October, thanks to generous grants from the Weaver Foundation and the Nassau County Sheriff's Office. Additional information may be found on the Museum's website:
<http://www.ameliamuseum.org/default.php?page=jail-n-bail>

Respectfully submitted,
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Chair, Historic District Council