

Rockford Historic Preservation Commission

2005 Annual Report

While 2005 was a relatively light year for Rockford's Historic Preservation Commission in terms of review of Certificates of Appropriateness, it was a very active one in other areas. Commission activities included the following:

- ♦ Review of 29 requests for Certificates of Appropriateness;
- ♦ Review of one nomination to the National Register of Historic Places;
- ♦ Review of a petition to withdraw from a local historic district; and
- ♦ Review of a major street project under Section 106 provisions.

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. All 29 applications for Certificates in 2005 were approved. However, the Commission did give a negative response to one proposal that was a preliminary request for opinion, not an actual COA application.

Certificates granted in 2005 included improvements to 1 residential property in Brown's Hills/Knightsville, 1 on Garfield Avenue, 11 in Haight Village, 2 commercial properties in Northeast State & Main, and 5 landmark properties.

210 West Jefferson Street Designated by the City as a landmark in 2003, the former Elks Club building at this location has been vacant for many years. It was acquired in 2003 by the Abilities Center which has as its goal the sale of the building to someone who can redevelop and use it in an appropriate manner. First steps in this process included a request to install banner-type signs in the arched windows on the east side of the building, windows that are clearly visible to anyone crossing the Jefferson Street (Bus. US 20) bridge into west downtown. These were ultimately approved by both the Preservation Commission and through zoning.



314 North Main Street The Commission reviewed a request from the City of Rockford, on behalf of the Friends of the Coronado, to cut a new interior doorway from the corner retail space at Wyman Street and Park Avenue into the main part of the theater. It came before the Commission because it was the opinion of the Building Department that they would have to modify one of the

exterior storefront doorways in order to meet accessibility requirements with this project. Although the Commission ultimately approved the request, it also had to be approved by the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency (IHPA) because the Coronado is listed on the Illinois Register of Historic Places. While IHPA had no problem with the interior door, they rejected the proposal to modify the exterior doorway. However, they were able to point out to the City how it could get the interior door it wanted without major changes to the exterior due to the historic nature of the building.

311 15th Avenue Designated by the City as a landmark in 2004, this site houses the gatehouse to Beyer Stadium, home field of the Rockford Peaches. It is the only structure still standing on the site. In order to highlight the role of this location in Rockford's history and recognize the importance of the Rockford Peaches, the Rockford Park District, owners of the property, submitted a request to place a sign on the roof of the building. Normally the Commission does not approve roof signs, but felt that this could be an exception because of the unique character of the site and of the sign.



Haight Village Street Changes After the Third Street bridge on the south side of Haight Village was destroyed by fire several years ago, the City of Rockford and Illinois Department of Transportation (IDOT) worked out a way to implement long-standing plans to modify the street pattern within Haight Village and immediately to the north of it. This involved making the following changes:

- ♦ Changing South Second Street between Walnut Street and the railroad to the south from a one-way to a two-way street, then realigning the street south of the tracks so it would connect easily with Seminary Street;
- ♦ Permanently closing South Third Street at Walnut Street and at the railroad where the bridge had burned down;
- ♦ Removing South Third Street altogether between East State and Walnut Streets, thereby eliminating a major safety problem at the intersection with State Street; and
- ♦ Modification of traffic signals throughout the project.



The project was complicated by the fact that part of it was being carried out by IDOT and part by the City, and by the fact that part of it lay inside the Haight Village Historic District and part within the East Rockford National Register Historic District. It was also complicated by the fact that IDOT began work on their part of the project before receiving approvals from either Rockford's Commission or IHPA. The Commission handled it through three separate but related reviews. All work was ultimately approved but with some modifications. The only portions outstanding at this point are replacing standard galvanized mast arms at Second and Walnut Streets with some that have a black powder finish, and reinstalling a set of period street lights that were taken out during the construction process.



201 West State Street A COA was granted in 2004 for exterior renovation of the Richardson Building, including removal of the enameled steel panels from the front elevation. When these were removed in 2005, it revealed that the brick underneath the panels was a cream color that did not match any of the other brick on the building. Consequently, the owners asked for and received permission to replace the cream colored brick with red that matched the existing as closely as possible. Since then, work has progressed steadily on the project.

Local Designations

The Commission did not receive any applications for new local landmarks or historic districts during the past year. However, it did receive a petition to withdraw nine parcels from the Brown's Hills/Knightsville Historic District. The properties involved are at the northwest corner of the District and include a variety of architectural styles ranging from three Victorian-era farmhouses to two scattered site homes built by the Rockford Housing Authority in the 1980s.

Rockford's ordinance requires that the same procedures be followed in withdrawing from a district as in creating one. Based on that, the petitioners had to submit an application form stating how their proposed withdrawal met ordinance criteria, a petition supporting the withdrawal, and a legal description of the area to be withdrawn. Once these items were received along with the filing fee, the Planning Administrator prepared a report on the merits of the case. His report plus all the application documents were submitted to the Preservation Commission which held a public hearing on the matter. Following lengthy testimony on both sides of the issue, the Commission voted unanimously to deny the petition based on three factors:

1. Removal of these parcels would widen the gap in the District along North Second Street (IL 251) in a particularly sensitive area at an intersection where there is a high traffic count. This could compromise the integrity of the District because of the potential of future commercial use on these parcels.
2. It would contribute to a lessening of the historical characteristics of the District due to the location of these nine parcels.
3. The properties included in the petition do include historic properties as indicated in the original application for designation.

The Commission's recommendation was submitted to Rockford City Council where it went through their standard committee process. Again after much discussion spanning several meetings, City Council concurred with the Commission and denied the petition. In doing this, at least one Council member stated that it was his hope and expectation that the Commission would do a better job of working with residents in this and other historic districts in the future.

To follow up on this, in its annual letter to owners of locally designated properties, the Commission proposed to do the following during 2006:

1. Create a newsletter to go from the Commission to residents and owners of designated properties on a regular basis to keep them abreast of Commission activities;

2. Meet at least once a year with residents and owners in each local historic district;
3. Ensure that applicants know what all their options are when an application for a COA is denied;
4. Continue to offer advice at Commission meetings to anyone who seeks it before they file an actual application for a COA;
5. Review past Commission actions and compare those actions with what is stated in the *Design Guidelines* which are supposed to form the basis for such actions;
6. Modify the Guidelines as appropriate following the above review; and
7. Repeat training for all Commission members on legal requirements they must comply with.

The photos below are representative of the homes included in the petition to withdraw.



Surveys

The primary survey work done in 2005 was for the Barber-Colman complex off South Main Street and the immediately surrounding area. This was done for the purpose of providing a firm basis for any future Section 106 review of projects on the site following demolition of Buildings 14 and 15 in 2005. This demolition was done with US EPA funds, hence the Section 106 review; demolition was allowed to proceed on the basis of environmental constraints on the buildings and the ground they sat on. However, IHPA staff made it clear that any future approvals of state or federally funded activity on the site would depend on having a complete survey of the site and its surroundings.

Through an RFP process, the City hired Granacki Historic Consultants of Chicago to complete the survey and, if warranted, a National Register nomination for Barber-Colman. They completed their survey work in late 2005. Their conclusion was that the Barber-Colman site itself would be a strong candidate for National Register designation under Criterion A for history and Criterion C for

architecture. However, they did not feel that there was enough in the area outside the Barber-Colman site to generate a historic district beyond the boundaries of the industrial complex.



Monitoring

The Commission reviewed the nomination of Garrison School on North Court Street for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. The building had previously been designated as a landmark by the City of Rockford in 1996. In order to be able to make use of the 20% federal income tax credit for historic preservation, the owner sought listing on the National Register as well. The Commission did recommend that the nomination be granted. It was listed on the Register in February 2006.



Activities involving sites already listed on the National Register included:

- ◆ Certificates of Appropriateness for the Coronado Theatre, the Elks Club building and for Tinker Swiss Cottage Museum. The last was for restoration of a balcony and for gates to block drive-through traffic on the property.
- ◆ In response to a written request from the owner of a Haight Village property and the architect for a property in Brown's Hills/Knightsville, the Commission staff prepared a list showing how applications for modifications to windows and/or doors have been dealt with over the years. The conclusion was that these actions have not been 100% consistent, not surprising in light of the length of time involved (1978-2005) and the number of individuals who had served on the Commission during that time. However, this did serve as a basis for the decision to review all Commission actions on COA requests, determine what if any problems exist, and find ways to resolve those problems.
- ◆ The Swedish Historical Society asked the Commission to review their proposal to build a Swedish-American Cultural Center in Haight Village. While they already own a vacant lot across from the Erlander Home, they indicated their desire to acquire two additional properties and demolish the structures on them for the new Center. They sought input from the Commission on how they would feel about the proposed demolitions. After discussing the matter at some

length, the consensus among Commission members was that they would not support the proposed demolition.

- ♦ The Commission's staff continued to maintain as much contact as possible with the caretaker for the Graham-Ginestra House, primarily through meetings concerning the heritage portion of a neighborhood plan for the South Main Street area. The property has been listed for sale again and remains a concern because of its tenuous future.

Activities

Petition to Withdraw from the Brown's Hills/Knightsville Historic District The proposed withdrawal from Brown's Hills/Knightsville consumed a lot of the Commission's time and that of its staff. As discussed above, every effort was made to ensure that all ordinance requirements were met and, just as importantly, that the petitioners were dealt with fairly. Proposed 2006 activities for the Commission arose from this process. It is the Commission's hope that the end result of this will be a positive one for the Commission and for the residents and owners of locally designated properties in the long run.

Proposal to Provide Training for Realtors When the application deadline for CLG grants approached, the Commission proposed submitting one that would help provide training in historic preservation for local realtors, focusing on how this Commission works and what the City's requirements are. However, after looking into how best to do this, both staff and the Commission felt that it would be best to research the project further and submit an application for a CLG grant in 2006.