

Historical-home owners catch a break

By Elida S. Perez

Statesman Journal

January 26, 2011

Making changes to homes in Salem's historical districts can be a relatively complex and lengthy process.

But a new Historic Preservation Plan has been established that aims to make it easier for homeowners to navigate.

Using a \$14,000 state grant, the city's Community Development Department worked with the Historic Landmarks Commission, historical property owners and staff to craft the new plan the City Council adopted in December.

Kimberli Fitzgerald, senior historical planner for the City of Salem, said the commission got feedback from public meetings, surveys, the Historic Landmarks Technical Advisory Committee and months of reviewing the existing codes to establish the new plan.

"All the changes we made were identified as a clear need by the property owners," Fitzgerald said.

The plan was designed to guide the work program for the Historic Landmarks Commission and staff during the next 10 years.

"When we were writing it, we tried to think of every type of work that would need to be done," Fitzgerald said.

Fitzgerald said improving the approval process for homeowners wanting to make changes to the exteriors of their homes was a top priority.

Most projects would take about 52 days to be approved through the Historic Landmarks Commission that oversees changes made to the exteriors of any buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places or on the city's register of local landmarks.

The adopted changes allow for more administrative reviews for minor projects, which shortens



Elida S. Perez |Statesman Journal

This home, owned by Calvin Steck, is in the Gaiety Hill/Bush's Pasture Park Historic District. The home is considered to be contributing to the district, which requires him to get approval for certain projects done to the exterior of the house.

Overview

Historic Preservation Plan

Areas of improvement include:

-Increased administrative review for minor projects as opposed to having to meet before the Historic Landmarks Commission.

-Clearer design standards for work involving windows, siding, additions or alterations and general guidelines for contributing and non-contributing homes.

-Improved flexibility for non-contributing homes.

-Clearer standards for windows and energy efficiency.

-Established demolition by neglect criteria and an abatement process.

-Notification for buyers at the point of sale and FAQ sheet that describes responsibilities for historical designations.

-Community outreach and education efforts.

For more information, call Kimberli Fitzgerald at (503) 588-6173 Ext. 7597.

the waiting time to about 25 days, Fitzgerald said.

"In terms of cost, the fees are the same, but the savings are in time," she said.

The previous code had one set of standards for all types of historical resources; the new code has separate standards for commercial and residential resources as well as separate standards for contributing and noncontributing resources.

Homes that have enough original historical material to convey the historical period of the district are considered contributing homes. Noncontributing homes were either built after the historical time period or were altered.

"Owners of noncontributing properties were being held to the same standards as contributing," said Glenn Gross, Salem Urban Planning administrator.

The new codes allow more flexibility for non-contributing homeowners to change things such as windows that are not visible from the street.

Contributing properties can now mostly go through the shorter administrative approval process for areas of the home that are not visible, as opposed to having to go through the commission.

Calvin Steck, who moved into a contributing home of the Gaiety Hill/Bush's Pasture Park Historic District in July, said changing his windows to be more energy efficient is an ongoing process.

Before the new codes were adopted he had to seek approval from the commission. Since the codes were being revised, approval was delayed.

"They (the commission) were concerned with preserving the materials and appearances," Steck said.

Now that the codes have been changed, he will be able to work with Fitzgerald through the administrative process to determine how to proceed with changing his many drafty windows.

"While we can't have exactly what we want, we can work with her," he said.

The new code has also established clearer design standards for work such as siding, exterior trim and minor architectural features and clearer standards for windows, doors, roofs and energy efficient features for the different types of historical resources.

The preservation plan has also established criteria for demolition by neglect, a move Fitzgerald said is not done by many cities.

In 2009, four homes in the Gaiety Hill/Bush's Pasture Park Historic District that dated from the 1900s to the 1930s were declared dangerous and were demolished.

Fitzgerald said if the city identifies a situation of neglect, they will try to work with the property owner.

"If they cannot or are unable to fix it, there is now a process of abatement where the city can go in and fix it and put a lien on the home," she said.

For H. Thomas Andersen, chairman for the South Central Association of Neighbors that includes the historical district where the homes were demolished, the change is a needed improvement.

"We're happy to have something," Andersen said, adding that the criteria should help prevent a repeat of the loss of historical resources. "What (the owner of the four homes) did in effect, is deliberately allowed the property to deteriorate."

Another part of the new plan that is being finalized is a method of notifying new buyers whose homes hold a historical designation.

"We are going to be working a lot harder to notify people at the point of sale," Fitzgerald said.

Because title companies are required to notify buyers if there is a lien on a home, Fitzgerald said they are going to flag historical properties with the city in their lien database so that when a title company contacts the city, the buyer will be notified of its designation. A FAQ sheet would also be provided that describes the responsibilities and benefits of historical designations.

The new plan also will include public outreach, including a series of workshops during National Historic Preservation Month in May, attending neighborhood association meetings and developing an handbook for homeowners that helps answer questions about design standards and procedures for making changes to their homes.

"This preservation program belongs to the community and the historic property owners that have to live with it," Fitzgerald said, adding that they will be conducting additional surveys to determine if any changes need to be made to the plan.

esperez@statesmanjournal.com or (503) 399-6740