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# Charting the Right Course for Your Local Preservation Program

By Kimberli Fitzgerald

Effective preservation planning successfully addresses the needs and reflects the values of the community; however, these needs and values are always changing.

Whether you are an experienced city planner or a trained architectural historian new to staffing your community's Landmarks Commission, the rational planning process can offer you a systematic approach to assess your current preservation program. It is key to aligning your efforts with the larger community's values and needs.



Salem, Oregon's Fairmount Neighborhood

When I first started as a historic planner at the City of Salem, Oregon, in February 2009, the historic preservation program was clearly caught in stormy waters. The City had submitted a National Register District nomination for the Fairmount neighborhood, an important residential district, to the State Historic Preservation Office, then withdrew it due to the angry outcry and concerns about unfair regulation from property owners within the potential district. On its face, Salem's program was one of the better ones in Oregon. The program had been around many years and had several designated districts. So why was there such a backlash to designation by the neighbors of the Fairmount neighborhood? I knew that the current preservation program was not aligning with the needs of the community and that I needed to chart a new course. I quickly turned to the rational planning process to guide my way.

## THE RATIONAL PLANNING PROCESS

The birth of modern planning began after World War II when city planners embraced scientific techniques rooted in the examination of data and the evaluation of alternative courses of action and implementation. Written by Edward Banfield, and first published in 1955, *Politics, Planning and the Public Interest* introduced the nation to the rational planning model. Banfield was a Harvard educated academic who began his career at the University of Chicago. He had a reputation as a brilliant maverick

and was influential not just in the field of planning but also in politics, and was advisor to Presidents Nixon, Ford and Reagan. Banfield's five-step approach to planning became the primary guide for city planners across the United States:

### *Banfield's Rational Planning Model:*

1. Current conditions & needs assessment
2. Design of courses of action;
3. Comparative evaluation of consequences;
4. Choice among alternatives;
5. Implementation of the chosen alternative.

It seemed appropriate for Salem's historic preservation program to follow this approach and to develop and implement an historic preservation plan, the city's first!

For Salem, assessing the current conditions began with an application for a Certified Local Government (CLG) grant to hire a consultant to help identify where the problems lay. Our first step was to document the City's current processes and codes. This was straightforward, establishing who does what, when and how, but did not include an assessment or evaluation of the effectiveness of the processes. In 2009, in Salem we had a well-established Historic Landmarks Commission which appeared to be thriving. However, the program was in trouble. In addition to the public outcry and concerns about



Fairmount Neighborhood, whose National Register nomination fight initiated a new preservation plan.

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unfair regulation expressed within the Fairmount neighborhood, a number of disgruntled applicants had recently appealed Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC) design review cases to the City Council, and many historic property owners were violating the code by not going through the historic design review process at all.

The next step was to assess the needs of the community. A consultant team, NW History Matters, began work on the project in January 2010. One of their first jobs was to add information to the City's website about the project and send out a media release to inform the public of the grant we received and to ask for volunteers to help. In early February, a technical advisory committee (TAC) comprised of representatives from the HLC, Planning Commission, historic neighborhoods, museums, heritage tourism groups, contractors and downtown businesses was established. We developed two questionnaires to find out what the public thought about the current Historic Preservation Program and its processes. Surveys were put on the City's website, and we held an on-line chat with the public to respond to questions and concerns. The TAC met throughout the spring of 2010 and hosted a

Historic Preservation Round Table to solicit feedback from the public, property owners and other stakeholders. More than 100 individuals responded to the public survey. When the surveys were tallied, the responses indicated that primary areas of concern were a lack of flexibility in the code, overregulation and long complicated application reviews. Historic property owners expressed serious concerns about the HLC's lack of understanding about the financial hardships caused by owning historically designated properties. There appeared to be no understanding in the community of the significance of Salem's history and its built environment, and why historic resources were being regulated in the first place. Responders indicated that while Salem did have a number of worthwhile heritage sites which deserved recognition, the HLC was not recognizing these resources or promoting them to local residents or visitors. Historic property owners felt overregulated and didn't understand the basis for this regulation or the fundamental purpose of Salem's historic preservation program.

Now it was time to figure out how best to address the identified needs. The TAC met throughout the summer, and divided into teams in order to de-



One of the homes demolished after plan implementation.

velop solutions based upon results from the public outreach. Every member provided substantive recommendations for identified issues and then prioritized their suggested solutions. From this process, The TAC recommended five goals with associated strategies and action items:

### Salem's Preservation Plan Goals – 2010

- Goal 1: Revise the historic preservation code and design guidelines;
- Goal 2: Develop a public outreach and education program;
- Goal 3: Develop Economic and Recognition Incentives program;
- Goal 4: Survey and recognize Salem's Historic Resources
- Goal 5: Promote Heritage Tourism and Local History.

While each of the goals were established independently to address specific problems identified in the outreach, they were all meant to address two overarching themes: 1) preservation of Salem's historic resources in order to educate the community about Salem's unique past; 2) private property owners who own and maintain historic properties provide a community benefit and deserve both incentives and recognition for this service. It is interesting to note, that while there were initially just four goals identified, a fifth goal emerged from this process. That goal, public outreach and education, emerged as a necessary solution for the need to communicate effectively that was identified across all of the topic areas. Improving communication with historic property owners and the community had to be a priority for the HLC and to ensure success of the overall program.

At last, implementation could begin. The preservation plan goals were presented to the HLC for their review and discussion. At the end of the summer 2010, a draft Historic Preservation Plan was presented to a joint meeting of the HLC, Planning Commission and City Council, who recommended that the Plan be adopted. In response to public concern about the complexity of the city code, the TAC, HLC, Planning Commission and City Council all identified revisions to the code as the first prior-

### Broad outreach increased citizen participation.

ity. Throughout the fall of 2010 the HLC worked to draft a new streamlined historic code. The feedback received from our public outreach indicated that historic property owners wanted two primary code revisions. First, they were interested in shorter, simpler application reviews. Second, they were interested in less restrictive criteria for simple exterior alterations like roof replacements, in-kind window and door replacements and rear additions. As a result, we came up with a program that included less restrictive criteria, and a simpler, streamlined design review process for these types of alterations. The revised code was adopted in December 2010.

In 2011, the Plan went into effect. The following year, the effectiveness of the revised code was evident. The City had twice as many historic design review applications as the year before, and code enforcement cases went down by half. Our first residential grant program was created and we

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Another home demolished after plan implementation.

were able to offer small grants to historic property owners for exterior maintenance and restoration projects for the first time.

## **SUBSEQUENT SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES**

It has been almost five years since the public outreach resulted in the adoption of Salem's first Historic Preservation Plan. Of the five adopted goals, we are on track to have all five completed within the next year. In addition to new economic incentives, we have developed robust education and outreach programs. In recognition of the efforts of the HLC and other cultural-non-profits, Salem received the Heritage All-Star Designation from the Oregon Heritage Commission, prompting the creation of the Salem Heritage All-Star Forum, which established a community-wide advocacy group dedicated to increasing heritage tourism. This upcoming year, we will work on Goal 4, survey and recognition of Salem's Historic Resources.

Our biggest challenge, like many preservation communities, continues to be the tension between the rights of private historic property owners and

the responsibility the HLC has to ensure preservation of Salem's cultural landmarks. Recently, the proposed demolition of several houses in a local district brought out very powerful feelings in the community regarding the preservation program. In this case, the HLC used our newly adopted demolition criteria for the first time and required the applicant to submit full development plans for the reuse of the site at the time of the demolition application. The criteria: "Does the proposed use have a higher benefit to the community than retaining the existing historic resource?" caused a lot of debate and disagreement. Unlike the proposed designation of the Fairmount neighborhood, where the neighbors were outraged at the thought of designation because of the perceived heavy-handedness of the city's preservation regulations, the neighbors in this case were up in arms over the apparent lack of adequate protection for the houses that were to be demolished. While the demolition request was originally denied by the HLC, their decision was overturned by the Salem City Council and the Council's decision to allow the demolition was upheld on appeal. In this case the process worked,

even though it didn't result in the outcome many in the community had hoped for. The question we are left to consider is whether or not the code is producing the community's desired outcome or whether it needs to be redrafted to ensure a different outcome?

### **IT'S NOT THE DESTINATION THAT MATTERS, BUT THE JOURNEY**

As preservation professionals, our final destination is always changing and the decision about where we go isn't really our choice. Don't we love that building? Don't we want to save that resource? I'm always surprised by these kinds of questions, because I'm not necessarily an advocate, and I don't work for an advocacy group; I am a historic preservation planner. While I don't fight for specific buildings, I do fight hard every day to ensure the integrity of the process is protected so

that our overall historic preservation program can thrive. I feel incredibly privileged to work for local government here in Oregon, where anyone can come to a public hearing and testify about a case or the preservation code, and have a real opportunity to effect change. As a preservation planner, I also know I can use the rational planning process to accommodate differing values and to empower the community to change the course of our preservation program. In our case, it made a big difference: increased support of our program; better education and public outreach; and clearly improved compliance with our historic preservation code. It might be worth a try in your community, too.

For more information about the City of Salem's historic preservation program, go to: <http://www.cityofsalem.net/Historic> ■

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