

FW: Design Guidelines

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Subject	FW: Design Guidelines
From	Allen, Amanda
To	Bowden (King), Anissa
Sent	Friday, January 14, 2011 8:17 AM

From: Sandy Strehlou [<mailto:ssstrehlou@fridayharbor.org>]
Sent: Thursday, January 13, 2011 5:02 PM
To: CityClerk
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Subject: Design Guidelines

Please direct this message to Marcia Higgins, D-4th Ward, and other the members of the City Council, the Design Task Force, and others who may be interested in this topic.

My husband's family is from Ann Arbor. Last week my mother-in-law, Rosalie Meiland, forwarded the annarbor.com article, *Ann Arbor Officials Looking to Adopt 'the Best Design Guidelines in the Country' for Downtown*. I am writing to share some perspective on the issues at hand.

The Town of Friday Harbor, where I live and work, has an historic overlay district. We also have a set of voluntary design guidelines and a citizen's board (the Historic Preservation Review Board) that reviews rehab and development projects within the historic district (which includes the downtown core and most of the town.) The historic preservation review board and design review process have been in effect since 2000. Though a voluntary program, all building projects that normally require a building permit from the Town, must submit project documentation and participate in a public design review meeting with the board before a building permit will be issued.

This program and review process is intended to steer rehabilitation of historic buildings, alteration of non-historic buildings, and new construction within the district, in a way that will enhance, rather than diminish the character of our community, and preserve the Town's historic resources. (If interested, see www.historicfridayharbor.org for the design guidelines, and www.fridayharbor.org for the historic preservation ordinance.)

Though we are a small community by numbers, and uniquely isolated as part of an archipelago of islands between Washington State and Victoria B.C., we populate some of the most expensive real estate in the state of Washington. Consequently the issues around design review, preservation and property rights are as serious here as anywhere. This fact played a significant role in the decision to be voluntary as opposed to a mandatory program—we needed community support and Council votes to adopt the program. As the program stands today, property owners (or their representatives) must participate in the design review process. Once reviewed, projects found "non-conforming" may still be granted building permits.

Many of those weighing in on the discussion in Ann Arbor question whether or not a voluntary program can have a benefit. I believe that while a voluntary program cannot prevent every bad project, there are tangible benefits when:

1. the program includes on-going and creative public education elements;
2. the standards and design review process are clear and concise;
3. the written standards are applied by the design review board fairly and consistently;
4. staff is skilled at avoiding confrontation with uncooperative applicants;
5. program staff work closely and cooperatively with all levels of the building department; and ideally

6. when incentives are tied to mandatory compliance.

1. **Public Education:** We go out of our way to recognize great projects with a Partners in Preservation Award and event every year. We also promote good projects on our website, www.historicfridayharbor.org. We do this by talking about the project and why it complied, and by promoting businesses and organizations that “do the right thing” through out cultural tourism promotion, our website and media outreach

2. **Standards/Process Clear and Concise:** Our design standards, history, and process are made widely available to applicants, architects, building contractors and the general public. We have a print version of the guidelines, they are online and we look for many ways to get them out in the community. That said, our guidelines aren't perfect, and after over ten years of using them, we have identified what isn't working well and are in the process of updating the guidelines/manual and our preservation ordinance. The new ordinance language will be much more comprehensive and will spell out the actual review process more clearly. We expect the new language to be adopted by next spring.

3. **Applying Standards Fairly and Consistently:** I noticed comments on Ann Arbor's proposed guidelines and design review board that spoke to the board's qualifications. This is really important. And just as important is finding board members who can work cooperatively with each other and avoid, to the extent possible, alienating the community. If the standards are clear and accessible to the public, and if staff and the board stick to them, rather than letting personal relationships, politics or personal aesthetics influence their comments and decisions, there will be far fewer angry meetings, law suits and ill will to contaminate the genuine intent of the program. This may seem obvious, but I have witnessed even professionals stray from the written guidelines.

4. **Avoid Confrontation:** Sometimes this is really hard, if not next to impossible depending on the applicant. But nothing goes farther to promote the program than staff and board members who are skillful, not just knowledgeable, when dealing with each other and the public. The composition of the review board is critical. A board too heavy with academics and architects, and without progressive developers, planners, property owners, and others will not benefit from the broadest perspective, or garner as much support from the community it needs to influence.

5. **Collaboration with the Building Department and others:** It is critically important for all staff and agencies involved in development, preservation, compliance, etc. to be on the same page and communicating effectively. If one department is diminishing the importance of the program to the public, it will undermine its success. Likewise, information from likely and unlikely sources goes a long way to identifying and resolving problems before they are bigger, or worse physically or politically irreversible.

6. **Incentives:** The best way to convince an applicant to comply with the guidelines is to offer incentives for mandatory compliance. In Friday Harbor we currently offer a building height allowance and a parking requirement waiver as incentives. Ironically, these two incentives are more applicable to large infill development projects than they are to preservation of historic buildings. Nonetheless, they have played a critical role in influencing the majority of the large, new construction projects that have come through over the last 8 years. We are currently developing new incentives to offer. Given the state of the economy, these will need to be low or no-cost to the Town.

Additionally, I think it is critical, to, if not already in place, have design standards that bolster your community's historic preservation program, especially for landmarks (the very old, and those considered “recent past,) not within designated historic districts. Transitional neighborhoods (those with a mix of building types and uses) are especially difficult when applying even well-written guidelines. It takes the most creative thinkers to make appropriate decisions for design guidelines when a new development is going to occur in a neighborhood with turn of the century, mid-century, and more contemporary buildings. The answer is not to throw up one's hands, but to identify the significant architectural features that can be true to the new building, while complimenting—not copying—its neighbors.

Having not read the actual draft guidelines, I don't know if they speak to rehab and alterations of existing historic and non-historic buildings. This is also critical to preserving the character of the city and neighborhood. In Friday Harbor, we strive to “stay true” to the architecture of the site, rather than forcing characteristics of a neighbor, which would end up standing out as, at best, confusing, and at worst, visually annoying.

And finally, the City has to “walk the talk.” Once adopted, the City must comply with the guidelines for its own new construction, rehab and alterations. The City must go through the design review process just like any other applicant. This is sometimes more difficult to accomplish than one would think. It is unfortunately easy for even well intended government managers, facilities staff and other decision-

makers to forget to check in before commencing work. This goes back to the point about being fair and consistent.

In the end, design review leads to rehab and development that is purposeful and has enduring value to the community. Even new buildings will one day have historic value. The design review process enhances that future, and results in invaluable documentation—the kind of documentation that preservationists and historians long for, and too often don't have in later years. Historic preservation is about the how's and why's of the people in a given place, and how their values are reflected in the physical buildings and objects that remain long after the planners, builders and owners are gone. Design review is worth the effort, now and then.

I apologize, in advance, if I have just gone to great length to state the obvious. At the risk of sounding silly, I wanted to offer a perspective to support the adoption of design review guidelines, process and panel. Ann Arbor is a wonderful city, one I look forward to visiting again.

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In 2008 the National Trust for Historic Preservation designated Friday Harbor one of its Dozen Distinctive Destinations.

For information about Friday Harbor's history and historic buildings visit www.historicfridayharbor.org.