

**MINUTES OF A REGULAR MEETING**

**URBANA HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION**

**APPROVED**

**DATE:** September 6, 2006

**TIME:** 7:00 p.m.

**PLACE:** City Council Chamber, 400 South Vine Street, Urbana, Illinois

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**MEMBERS PRESENT:** Rich Cahill, Scott Dossett, Alice Novak, Trent Shepard, Mary Stuart, Art Zangerl

**MEMBERS EXCUSED:** None

**MEMBERS ABSENT:** None

**STAFF PRESENT:** Robert Myers, Planning Division Manager; Rebecca Bicksler, Community Development Associate; Teri Andel, Recording Secretary

**OTHERS PRESENT:** None

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**1. CALL TO ORDER, ROLL CALL AND DECLARATION OF QUORUM**

Urbana Historic Preservation Commission Chair, Alice Novak, called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m. The roll call was taken and a quorum was declared with all members present.

**2. CHANGES TO THE AGENDA**

There were none.

**3. APPROVAL OF MINUTES**

Mr. Zangerl made a motion to approve the May 31, 2006 meeting minutes as presented. Mr. Cahill seconded the motion. Upon a vote the Commission unanimously approved the minutes as presented.

**4. WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS**

Information on revisions to the Illinois Open Meetings Act (Public Act 1058, 94<sup>th</sup> Illinois General Assembly) was distributed.

**5. AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION**

There was none.

**6. CONTINUED PUBLIC HEARINGS**

There were none.

**7. OLD BUSINESS**

There was none.

**8. NEW PUBLIC HEARINGS**

There were none.

**9. NEW BUSINESS**

**Neighborhood Conservation Districts.**

Robert Myers introduced the topic and explained that the Comprehensive Plan, City Council Common Goals, and several neighborhood groups have referred to neighborhood conservation districts (NCDs) as a way to solve problems with neighborhood character. Rebecca Bicksler, Community Development Associate, has been researching NCDs and how they work and would share the findings of City staff on this issue. Ms. Bicksler gave a presentation as follows.

Neighborhood Issues. Some of the issues prompting the discussion of Neighborhood Conservation Districts were found in Urbana's 2005 Comprehensive Plan, as well as in the City Council's Common Goals. Other issues were outlined in documents presented by the West Urbana Neighborhood Association (WUNA) and the Historic East Urbana Neighborhood Association (HEUNA). From HEUNA, some of the issues addressed were the retention of single-family owner-occupied housing, property maintenance, the incompatible new design of multi-family buildings, brick sidewalk restoration, and lack of curbs and gutters on the streets. From WUNA, some of the causes for concern were the conversion of owner-occupied homes to rental properties, property maintenance, new multi-family developments, parking, congestion, incompatible lots, the walkability of the neighborhood, nuisances such as noise and trash, and protecting the traditional neighborhood density.

Neighborhood Conservation Districts (NCDs): What are they? Mrs. Bicksler stated that the short definition of a Neighborhood Conservation District is that it is a flexible tool to preserve physical characteristics that the neighborhood values. She further stated that a Neighborhood Conservation District can be implemented either by stand-alone zoning or through overlay zoning, the difference

being that stand-alone zoning would create a new zoning district with its own set of guidelines for the conservation district while an overlay zoning would add new criteria to existing zoning districts.

Main Functions of NCDs. Mrs. Bicksler stated that some of the main functions of NCDs are historic preservation, neighborhood planning and design guidelines. For historic preservation, NCDs are sometimes used by cities to require design review of not-quite-historic neighborhoods which otherwise wouldn't qualify for local historic district status, either because homes in said neighborhood are not old enough or do not have the integrity to be nominated as such. Regarding the neighborhood planning aspect, this is often the first step in creating an NCD and involves a great deal of resident interaction to clearly identify neighborhood values. With respect to design guidelines, these are often a component of NCDs and are used most often for one of two reasons: to preserve historic qualities or to guide the overall form and character of the neighborhood.

Process of Creating an NCD. Mrs. Bicksler stated that the first step in creating an NCD is to create enabling legislation. NCDs requirements can vary depending on the needs of a particular neighborhood. Additionally, neighborhood involvement was identified as an important component of creating an NCD.

Benefits of NCDs. Mrs. Bicksler identified some of the benefits of NCDs, stating that they are a valuable tool for some forms of neighborhood preservation. For example, NCDs are one of the only ways to protect not-quite-historic districts. They can also regulate infill development to insure compatibility with the rest of the neighborhood. They can be used in areas experiencing "mansionsization", where smaller homes are demolished and replaced with much larger homes out of scale with neighboring homes. NCDs can be used to protect neighborhood-specific physical characteristics through design guidelines or design review procedures and they can create a format for neighborhood planning.

Shortfalls of NCDs. Mrs. Bicksler stated since NCDs are zoning tools, they cannot regulate the publicly owned aspects of the neighborhood such as streets, sidewalks, street lighting, and trees located in the public right-of-way. Additionally, NCDs are not the best tools for preserving truly historic properties. Historic districts would offer the most protection for such properties. NCDs also cannot be used to enforce property maintenance. Another potential problem was identified as NCDs regulating all properties within a neighborhood when a neighborhood problem might be limited to a specific small area.

Summary of Issues. Mrs. Bicksler summarized that NCDs will not resolve all of Urbana's most pressing neighborhood issues such as those identified by the West Urbana Neighborhood Association (WUNA) and the Historic East Urbana Neighborhood Association (HEUNA). Some aspects of NCDs, however, can be used without necessarily enacting NCDs. For instance design guidelines and design review can be carried out by creating an overlay district similar to the existing MOR district. Also, neighborhood planning can be done without an NCD. The city of Blacksburg, Virginia has adopted a tiered program that combines neighborhood planning with code enforcement and rental permitting, which they call their "Neighborhood Enhancement Program".

Based on the neighborhood issues identified for Urbana, City Staff is suggesting a set of initiatives intended to better address problems. Some of these or new initiatives while others are already in place or in process.

New initiatives were identified as follows:

Design Review for Lincoln/Busey Avenue Corridor. Mrs. Bicksler stated that the relatively high-density zoning in the Lincoln/Busey Avenue Corridor area would allow for potentially incompatible development and stated that if design review were enacted within this transition area the rest of the neighborhood could benefit. The structure of the design review could be similar to that of the existing MOR district. There are other areas in the city that could similarly benefit from design review.

Community Development Corporations (CDCs). A private community development corporation could be created to buy and repair housing. A CDC could acquire, repair and convert some problem apartments back to single-family homes and sell them with covenants to ensure that they remain single-family or owner-occupied. The City and the University of Illinois would be able to help with technical assistance to establish such a corporation.

Rezone Selective Blocks in East Urbana. In the Future Land Use Maps of the 2005 Comprehensive Plan (Map #10 specifically), Mrs. Bicksler noted that there were areas in East Urbana where the zoning is inconsistent with what is existing. There are several blocks of multi-family zoning where the existing development is single-family. Rezoning these areas could protect neighborhood character. City staff is just beginning to work on a neighborhood plan with the Historic East Urbana Neighborhood Association. The plan in part would probably identify areas to be studied for rezoning.

Potential Historic Districts. Local historic designations are the highest form of protection for historic neighborhoods. It is important to identify potential districts and work with residents to designate properties appropriately.

Mrs. Bicksler identified existing initiatives as follows:

Streetscape Preservation. Streetscape includes public improvements such as streets, sidewalks, street trees, street lights, and benches. A particular streetscape design can be maintained through a conscious effort for the City to maintain and preserve these elements over time. For instance the City replaces dead and damaged street trees on a regular basis. A long-term commitment is necessary to carry this out, and this should be consciously recognized.

Property Maintenance and Occupancy & Rental Registration. Community Development Services is carrying out these initiatives. Revised building and maintenance codes are in the process of being adopted. The Zoning Ordinance was recently slightly revised in terms of occupancy. The proposed Rental Registration Program would require for the first time that single-family rental homes be inspected.

Gravel Driveways and Parking Lots. The City has received a lot of reports about gravel driveways and parking lots spreading. Also gravel can sometimes cause dust problems for higher traffic lots. City Staff is looking into environmentally friendly ways to contain gravel driveways and parking lots.

The meeting was next opened to Commissioner questions and comments.

Mr. Zangerl stated that one issue not discussed is sidewalks blocked by overhanging shrubbery and branches. Mrs. Bicksler answered that she believes there is an ordinance already in place in the City of Urbana that covers this issue. Mr. Myers suggested that the City does currently deal with this issue. Complaints are taken on a case-by-case basis and the City will respond.

Additionally, Mr. Zangerl inquired as to the idea of a conservation district in the Lincoln/Busey Avenue corridor. Mr. Myers clarified that *design review* was being suggested for this corridor. He further explained that for many years the zoning in West Urbana allowed single-family homes to be converted to apartments, but that changed when most of the West Urbana Neighborhood was rezoned. The zoning for the Lincoln/Busey corridor, however, still allows new apartment buildings to be constructed, and it is quite possible there for homes to be torn down to build apartments. Mr. Zangerl further inquired as to whether new zoning would be implemented in this area or if an overlay type of zoning would be utilized. Mr. Myers responded that an overlay zoning requiring design review is envisioned. Mrs. Bicksler commented this is one area showing that designating the entire neighborhood as a Neighborhood Conservation District would not be necessary to deal with development happening mostly in one particular area.

Mr. Zangerl asked if the creation of the proposed design guidelines would include the input of homeowners in the area, to which Mrs. Bicksler answered that there would be public hearings held during the creation process of design guidelines.

Mr. Myers further explained that design review is what most people in the public have been referring to when discussing the benefits of neighborhood conservation districts. Ms. Novak inquired as to the difference between design review and NCDs. Mrs. Bicksler responded that enabling legislation for an NCD could apply to other neighborhoods, not just one given neighborhood with which we are concerned. Conversely, design review is set up for a certain area. Ms. Novak stated that she believes the Historic East Urbana Neighborhood area needs either an NCD or design review and suggested an overlay district for this neighborhood. Mrs. Bicksler responded that this is a possibility but that City staff is recommending that the most important protection for East Urbana would be to rezone specific areas with problem zoning.

Mr. Cahill stated that MOR design guidelines have worked in the existing MOR district in Urbana and that he likes the idea of doing something similar with the Lincoln/Busey Avenue corridor. He advised that the concept of a private community development corporation takes “deep pockets” and may be difficult to make work.

Ms. Stuart stated that she is glad to see that staff considers NCDs as one tool but raised a concern that information about NCDs may be wrongly biased. They should not be discarded as a solution just because they cannot solve all problems.

Mr. Shepard asked whether there are very many different zoning districts in the Historic East Urbana Neighborhood and what they are. Mr. Myers reviewed the Zoning Map and responded that the Zoning Map shows mostly R-4 zoning north of Green Street and mostly R-3 zoning to the south.

The area north of Green Street presents the most problems due to conflicts between zoning and land use there.

Mr. Dossett stated that the staff report wrongly indicates that the Historic East Urbana Neighborhood Association (HEUNA) wants fewer rental properties. HEUNA is not monolithic and opinion of its members varies, but the group has pledged to not discriminate against rental housing. HEUNA is more concerned with the condition of properties than with who owns a given property. Whether or not a property is owner-occupied is not of as much concern as it might be in the West Urbana area. Additionally, he noted that on page five of the summary section of the report and on page two of the main body of text regarding overlay districts, Main Street is mentioned as a candidate for such an overlay district. He suggested that this be extended south to cover Green Street as well. Mr. Dossett stated that in general, he would like City staff to open up their domain of design review so that the more complex the scope of a permit, the more detailed the design review would be for said permit. Further, he stated that designating Historic East Urbana as an NCD would be a good way to begin design review and then work up to designation as a historic district. Also the City should look at Elm Street for design review.

Ms. Stuart inquired what would happen next in the process. Mrs. Bicksler responded that presentations were made to the Urbana Plan Commission and City Council. Both asked for staff to return with specific information. Ms. Stuart further questioned why some of these recommendations, such as review of infill development, are already being done. Mr. Myers answered that this very process was being carried out to get feedback on approaches such as this.

Mr. Dossett said in terms of design review he was thinking about the proverbial “quaint little cottage” being “driven into the ground” by someone who doesn’t care about the neighborhood. Mr. Myers responded that design review deals with whether or not changes are compatible with the character of the rest of the neighborhood. Under design review, a falling-down building would not be reviewed by a commission unless the property owner wanted to make exterior changes or demolish the building. Property maintenance codes dealt with the condition of the building.

For clarification on the issue of historic-based versus non-historic based design review, Mr. Myers asked Mr. Dossett if he envisioned the City reviewing things like replacement windows or installation of vinyl siding. Mr. Dossett suggested that if a building permit is required for these things, then design review should be a part of the building permit process and given that this is a minor change in HEUNA, approval should be no problem.

Mr. Cahill stated that he liked the idea of making Main Street an NCD and having design review. He cited that MOR zoning has worked well on Green Street and he believes it has stabilized the neighborhood.

Ms. Novak asked for clarification on the difference between design review and an NCD. Mr. Myers answered that historic preservation itself is a form of design review, but that historic preservation-based design review put emphasis on integrity and original building materials whereas NCD-based design review would not. Ms. Novak stated that historic districts should still be promoted, as Urbana has only two and that several people are looking into NCDs to preserve older homes in the West Urbana area. She suggested that there would be another seminar about historic preservation, historic districts and historic landmarks. Ms. Novak also remarked that the Illinois property tax freeze (in which there is an eight-year “freeze” period on property taxes for an historic property and

a four-year “thaw” period) could be a useful financial incentive for turning multi-family houses back into single-family.

Mr. Myers stated that overall City staff is attempting to identify the underlying threats to neighborhood character in places like West and East Urbana, and that City staff is looking to recommend targeted solutions without making everyone needlessly jump through hoops. Mr. Zangerl suggested that some problems are different between East Urbana and West Urbana but that others are the same. Ms. Stuart added that historic districts might not be advisable for areas such as East Urbana area where different solutions may work better.

Mr. Myers spoke further on the idea of private community development corporations. He explained that there are examples of CDCs working in neighborhoods surrounding major universities. He explained that most worked from a variety of funding sources. Mr. Myers also mentioned the Renaissance Initiative Community Development Corporation in Danville, Illinois. If Danville can make a CDC work, then so can Urbana. Mr. Shepard stated that HEUNA would be challenged to create a private development corporation, citing that it is easy to lose money on renovating distressed properties. Mr. Cahill mentioned that the City of Decatur has a similar development group and that anything is possible given the momentum and the right people coming together.

### **Historic Architecture School Art Competition**

Mrs. Bicksler presented this topic, stating that she wanted to share an idea for a program she learned about at the statewide historic preservation conference. She attended a session about an art competition for both middle school and high school students in which students draw an historic building and write a one-page essay on the building. The purpose of the competition is to encourage and teach historic preservation to students of this age group. She stated further that this will be a great educational tool for historic preservation for students and adults alike in Urbana. Mr. Zangerl posed the question of how many contestants would be involved in such a program here, to which Mrs. Bicksler answered that the number of contestants differs with each contest that is held.

Mr. Cahill offered that the Champaign County Preservation and Conservation Association might help in funding such an event and stated that he feels the event is a good idea. Mr. Zangerl stated that the event is a great idea to try and see how it works out. He suggested Urbana Free Library as a display area, and Mr. Cahill suggested Lincoln Square Village.

Ms. Novak stated that she liked the idea of such a contest ending in May, which is Historic Preservation Month, and further offered that she feels the contest is a wonderful idea and that the contestants should also emphasize architectural style as well. She asked if the contest would indeed take place. Mr. Myers answered that this was an idea that City staff is looking at but needed more work.

## **10. MONITORING OF HISTORIC PROPERTIES**

Ms. Novak asked whether or not the house on Buena Vista Court had its porch roof changed. Mr. Myers responded that the homeowner contacted them about doing so and that an application for a

COA had been mailed to her. He has not heard anything more but will have someone drive by the property to see if any work had taken place.

#### **11. STAFF REPORT**

Mr. Myers reported that City staff had just received an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness to replace all of the existing windows in the Royer House. It could not be on tonight's agenda because of notification requirements. The applicant has asked if a special meeting could be held as any replacement windows had to be manufactured and cold weather will begin soon. All of the Commissioners indicated they would be willing to hold a special Historic Preservation Commission meeting.

#### **12. STUDY SESSION**

There was none.

#### **13. ANNOUNCEMENTS**

Thanks to Bill Rose. Bill Rose recently resigned from the Urbana Historic Preservation Commission. An opening for his position on the Commission was announced.

Lincoln Square. The National Register nomination for Lincoln Square Village is pending approval in Washington, D.C. At the Illinois Historic Sites Advisory Council meeting, no mention was made of the Commission's findings on the nomination, at which the nomination was approved.

Preserving Cemeteries. "Preserving Historic Cemeteries in Your Community: A day-long workshop for historic preservation staff, commissioners and genealogists", will be held September 29 in Godfrey, Illinois.

West Urbana House Tour. On October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006, there will be a house tour in the West Urbana Neighborhood sponsored by the neighborhood association and PACA. The tour will concentrate on Green, Elm and High Streets.

#### **14. ADJOURNMENT**

Mr. Zangerl moved to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Cahill seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned by Ms. Novak at 8:46 p.m.

Submitted,

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Robert Myers, Planning Division Manager