

Mackinac Island, St. Ignace Both Face Historic Preservation Challenges

By Karen Gould

St. Ignace wants to rehabilitate a historic building with modern materials, while Mackinac Island is remodeling a relatively young, 50-year-old vinyl-sided building in a historic district. Both cities are concerned about historic preservation, and both find their zoning ordinances don't give them much guidance.

Historic preservation specialists say that zoning ordinances may not be effective in addressing historic properties. Communities can get bogged down when seeking unbiased decisions based on general planning rules in their ordinances. They recommend, instead, that projects be considered individually, to focus on the uniqueness of individual buildings and their neighborhoods.

Using the 10 standards found in the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation when reviewing plans is the best way to address these issues, professionals say.

In the case of St. Ignace, the Museum of Ojibwa Culture building, a 171-year-old former Catholic church, is losing paint. Because it is designated a National Historic Landmark, the city is concerned about whether it can replace the old wood siding with a new, synthetic cement fiber siding. Its other options are to scrape the loose paint and recoat the wood with fresh primer and paint, turn the old siding over and paint the newly exposed surface, or remove the old siding altogether and replace it with new, painted wood.

A decision is expected in the next few months.

On Mackinac Island, the city is in the process of converting the old medical center into apartments for police. Built in 1956, the building is on Market Street, which is the city's historic district.

Because of its significance in history, the entire island has been designated a National Historic Landmark, although the old med-

ical building is not specifically listed as a historic structure.

Vinyl covered its original wood siding, but both were removed this winter in preparation for new cement fiber siding.

Initially, the city planned to install new vinyl siding, but historic suitability questions raised by the Planning Commission led the city council to switch to fiber cement siding at its January 16 meeting. Council rushed its decision because ice forming on the Straits could soon halt freight deliveries.

Officials in both communities needed to know what would be appropriate from a historic preservation standpoint. The St. Ignace Downtown Development Authority, which operates the Museum of Ojibwa Culture, turned to historical architect Robert McKay, who works in the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office.

His advice was that the cement fiber siding would be permitted, but wood would be better.

"My job is to try to have the best interest of the building in mind," he told *The St. Ignace News*.

"Repair is always the first option," he noted, but repair may not always be possible, especially when the original materials break down because of age.

When replacement is called for, Mr. McKay said, a material similar to the original is preferred.

The St. Ignace museum was built with wood, which wears out, he said. A replacement siding of sugar pine would be cost effective and durable, although cement fiber siding may be a viable replacement.

"In all likelihood, it would have no appreciable affect on their National Register eligibility," said Mr. McKay, after talking with city leaders about the museum. "I encouraged them to use all natural siding. It is the preferred material."

Fiber cement siding has its



In preparation for new siding, plywood covers Mackinac Island's old medical center on Market Street. The building is being converted to housing for Island police. The fiber cement siding planned for the historic district structure raised concerns of city planners Tuesday, January 8.

own problems. The synthetic product is overly brittle and can crack in cold environments like the Straits of Mackinac. Synthetic products also reach a point when they are no longer made, he noted.

"Wood siding will always be around," he said. "Synthetic products always go away."

Synthetic material with a fake wood grain pattern, Mr. McKay says, is a bad idea, giving the appearance of being real when it is not. He stressed that remaining true to a building is important when remodeling or renovating.

According to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, "Each property shall be recognized as a physical record of its time, place, and use. Changes that create a false sense of historical development, such as adding conjectural features or architectural elements from other buildings, shall not be undertaken."

If siding is repaired and sections replaced, it should be with the same type of material. Siding that is completely replaced should match the dimensions of the original, he said. In other words, four-inch clapboard siding should be replaced with lap siding that also has four inches exposure, even if it is not of the

same material.

The medical center is not a listed historic structure, so there is more leeway in what can be done with it. In that case, he said, "We have to look at the history, the character of a neighborhood, and not make it any worse than when we started."

City planners should ask three questions, he said: How does the structure relate to the character of its surroundings? How does it relate to the period of time for its intended use? How can that be maintained?

"Arguments are building-specific," said Mr. McKay. "The preference is to maintain what's there," and the Secretary of Interior standards for historic preservation help gauge the appropriateness of decisions using local zoning regulations.

Phil Porter, the top administrator for the Mackinac Island State Park Commission, said the siding on the Island's Victorian cottages is one of the defining elements of architectural character of a house.

"Up to this point, we have never allowed anything other

Election Filing Deadline Is Wed.

With less than a week before election petitions are due, three candidates have filed paperwork and will vie for two Mackinac Island City Council seats. Five other city positions and two school board seats also will be on the ballot Tuesday, May 6. Candidate petitions for the election need to be filed with the city clerk by 4 p.m. Wednesday, February 13.

Island residents will head to the polls May 6 to cast ballots as terms expire for city supervisor, assessor, treasurer, clerk, two council seats, and the mayor.

City Council members Jason St. Onge and Armin Porter are seeking re-election to the three-year post, and will be joined on the ballot by Anneke Myers, who will seek one of the two council openings.

Also filing to retain their one-

year terms in office are Margaret Doud, who has been the Island mayor since 1975 and seeks her 34th term, Karen Lennard, who is running for her fifth term as city clerk, Rick Linn is running for his third term as treasurer, Ron Dufina, who is seeking his 26th year as city supervisor, and Robert Benser, who is running for his 10th year as assessor.

Trish Martin has decided not to seek re-election to her seat on the Board of Education, while incumbent Larry Rickley has petitioned to run again for the four-year post.

Other petitions are still out. Petition forms can be picked up at the clerk's office at Community Hall.

The official list of candidates will appear in *The St. Ignace News* after the February 13 filing deadline.

Communities often forget to build into their construction schedules time for unforeseen circumstances, like when unexpected items or evidence of the past are found during renovation.

In Mackinac Island's case, the original wood siding on the medical building wasn't discovered until after the vinyl siding was being removed. By that time, the city had committed to replacing the vinyl with cement fiber.

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