

Oysterville, WA

Design Review Workshop Report

November 12, 2007

The Oysterville Design Review Board (ODRB and Oysterville Restoration Foundation (ORF) staged an all-day retreat and training session on October, 27, 2007 in which participants reviewed the accomplishments of the community's preservation program, refined skills in design review and the application of design guidelines, and updated a strategy for promoting preservation. The following is a recap of the topics and issues addressed.

Segment 1

Overview of Design Review

How review systems work

Design review systems are established to preserve historic resources, protect property values and enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors. The majority make use of a volunteer board, using a set of officially adopted design guidelines, to monitor improvements within the district, promote an awareness of preservation and assist property owners in meeting preservation objectives.

National models

Most historic districts in the nation use a Certificate of Appropriateness process, in which a design review board must approve improvement proposals. This includes work that requires a building permit, and also typically extends to other exterior alterations and repairs to buildings that may not require a building permit, but could affect the character and integrity of the district and of individual historic resources. The Oysterville system fits within this model.

Successful models rely upon administrative support for the local government as well. This includes staff to assist in preparing cases for the board to review, issuing the formal certificate of appropriateness and monitoring construction to assure that it is in compliance.

Objectives for the historic district in Oysterville

The Oysterville Historic District is one of the most important historically significant villages in the State of Washington. Many buildings, streets and landscapes convey its early stages of development. It reflects an early, and important, period in the history of the state, and its preservation is a high priority for the community.

General principles in the Oysterville Guidelines

The Oysterville design guidelines are based on national models, including the Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines. They remain quite valid, and address the key issues related

to preservation of historic buildings and to compatible new construction in the historic context.

Walking Tour

The group conducted a walking tour of the historic district, observing existing conditions and recent improvements. Overall, the historic integrity of the district remains high. Historic structures are well maintained, and historic landscapes also are strongly visible. There are some specific projects that have presented challenges to the Board, but overall, the character and integrity of the historic district remain intact. It is important to recognize the success of the district and the design review program: It is typical to focus on issues that have arisen, and specific projects that may have had some disappointment in the results. The successes, which include projects that were well executed, and actions that were prevented because they were not even proposed, are more difficult to document. The general public is less aware of these positive aspects of the review process. When opportunities arise, the successes of the program should be highlighted, in news media, in reports to the county, and related devices.

Segment 2

In the second segment of the workshop, participants discussed means of enhancing the way in which the board operates, and reviewed the roles of a successful design review board. These roles are:

Education – working to build a greater understanding of preservation throughout the community and the county at large

Facilitation – helping property owners achieve success in preservation through technical assistance

Advocacy – lobbying local government to support preservation programs

Regulation – assisting in the administration of the preservation ordinance through design review and monitoring for compliance

Refining the review process

Board roles & dynamics

The board is charged with an important responsibility, in terms of protecting the integrity of the historic district. This may at times seem thankless, but it is a responsibility that will be recognized by future generations who will be grateful that the district has been preserved.

Board members must also remember that there will at times be disagreements, among board members and property owners. The key is to continue to focus on the charge of enforcing the ordinance, and of making decisions based on the design guidelines.

County role

The county government's role is also very important in preservation of the historic district. While the village may seem remote, and facing issues that are not as evident elsewhere in the jurisdiction, it is essential that the county provide consistent, on-going support. This applies to planning staff, code enforcement officials, as well as commissions and boards who interface with the preservation program.

Steps in reviewing a project

It is important to consider a review meeting as an exercise in information management, in which the content of a proposed action is clearly presented and understood, and then it is evaluated using the adopted design guidelines. All parties should have an opportunity to provide comment, and decisions should be made by formal vote. Records of the decisions should be clear, and responsibility for monitoring should be identified. The steps in reviewing a project are described in more detail in a workshop handout.

Procedural improvements

Key issue is how to assure that work is executed as approved. While the formal responsibility for monitoring compliance rests with county staff, the board can assist by providing on-going updates to them.

BUILDING COALITIONS

The DRB and the ORF should continue efforts to build a broad base of support for historic preservation in the region. This includes working with the county staff and other groups in the area that have an interest in preservation. Some specific actions:

Strengthen Working Relationships with Pacific County:

Continue efforts to strengthen working relationships with county staff. Engage them in informal gatherings where they can learn about the community's interest in preserving the character of the area.

Assist with compliance enforcement. A board member should accompany a County official during the inspection of buildings in the Historic District where construction is under way. Board members should request to be notified when certain key inspection steps will occur.

Build a Regional Preservation Coalition.

Continue to hold events with the Lower Columbia Preservation Society, Clatsop County Historical Society, and other groups in the region who have a interest in history, preservation and community planning. This will highlight the focus and importance of historic preservation on the peninsula and in the region.

BUILD A SENSE OF SUPPORT IN THE OYSTERVILLE COMMUNITY

The ODRB and ORF should maintain an ongoing program of outreach to property owners to promote good preservation practices.

Stage community design discussions.

The Foundation should organize a work session that offers residents and others an opportunity to informally discuss issues and ask questions about design topics, potential actions and provide other pertinent information. This meeting should take place separate of any of Board meetings to ensure its distinction from any Board decisions.

The Foundation also should steer a public relations campaign to promote preservation and the valuable role that the board plays. This can be achieved through a number of media. A monthly newsletter could be produced that would include discussions of the economic benefits of preservation, highlight successful construction projects, and highlight the history of the community. This could appear as a weekly, or monthly, article in the Chinook Observer.

The foundation's website should be updated to include important links to preservation organizations, including the National Park Service (www.nps.gov/history/hps/) and Washington's Department of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (www.dahp.wa.gov). These links provide important information on a range of preservation topics. Other links could include the Lower Columbia Preservation Society and Clatsop County Historical Society.

USING THE DESIGN GUIDELINES - THE REVIEW PROCESS

Interpretation of Design Guidelines:

The Oysterville design guidelines are organized in a hierarchical format: Statements of design goals precede sections of individual design guidelines. These establish an "intent statement" for the topic at hand. If a specific guideline does not seem address a particular design issue, then these broader descriptions of neighborhood goals should be referenced. This should provide a basis for making an informed decision. If even these topic-based intent statements do not seem to address the issue, then the broad, district-wide goals, which are set forth in the first section of the guidelines, should be used to make the decision.

Is important to judge a design as an individual building within its neighborhood context as well as the broader historic district setting. For this reason, the district is defined in sub-areas, for which the contexts vary. The guidelines provide information about the design goals and methods of response in each of these contexts. The board should ask that a design proposal be presented with information that describes its context. This is especially important when new construction is proposed in the district. This can be illustrated through models, hand drawn sketches and computer generated models. The Google Sketchup Program is a tool that is readily available to most architects and is easy to use for illustrating three-dimensional character of the context as well as the proposed project. Many communities are using this or similar tools.

The Review Board's Role in Designing Projects

It is tempting to help an applicant by re-designing the project during a review board meeting, when the proposal as submitted does not meet the design guidelines.. Technically, the board should refrain from such action, and instead should indicate which guidelines are at issue and then reschedule the meeting for a time when the applicant can provide revised information.

Conceptual Design Review

The Review Board should be involved early in the conceptual stage of the project so there are no surprises at the final review which could potentially lead to significant changes or delays in the design/construction process.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

A list of qualified contractors/skilled craftsmans should be compiled and posted on the website to help residents.

A list of suppliers with quality construction materials should be compiled and posted on the website to help residents.

Provide construction financing assistance to property owners.

The Foundation should create a construction assistance grant to help fund construction projects in the Historic District. This could be utilized by residents to assist in construction projects that require special preservation treatments.

Provide design assistance to property owners.

Also offer small grants to property owners, to secure design services of professionals trained in preservation. In some cases, this will help orient property owners in the appropriate direction at the outset of their project.

ADMINISTRATION

The Board should conduct meetings even if no project is up for review. At these meetings procedures, issues and questions should be discussed.

A design guideline checklist should be created. It should be used by both the Board and applicant.

Leave personal opinions at the door. The project should be reviewed - not the person.

Segment 3

Special design issues

Windows

Many times replacement of windows is not the best solution to conserve energy. Generally weather penetration occurs around the frame of the window rather than through the window pane. Minor intervention such as the installation of interior storm windows, the re-glazing of window panes, or caulking around the window trim should be utilized. Additionally sealing the basement/foundation and attic will often increase energy efficiency better than window replacement.

Preserving the Integrity of a Resource

A proposed alteration that degrades the historic integrity of a building should not be accepted. The guidelines suggest that 75% of the exterior and 75% of the structural elements be preserved to maintain the integrity of the building.

Open Space/View Corridors

Proposed buildings/additions should maintain open space and views, which are also characteristics of the district. For this reason, additions should be to the rear of a structure or setback from the primary facade and not significantly reduce views through the property. This is especially important in the Core and Shoreline neighborhoods.

New construction should respect the traditional building width (30-45 feet) seen in historic buildings. Larger buildings can be broken into smaller masses that frame views through the property creating view corridors.

Retaining open space on a property will also preserve the natural setting that defines Oysterville. A design should avoid the removal of stands of mature trees.

New Materials

The issue of new materials is important in Oysterville and its coastal climate. Hardi plank and other new materials can be used in the district as long as they maintain the high level of design seen in historical materials and design. The Northwoods and Douglas neighborhoods have a greater flexibility in materials while the Core, Southwoods and Shoreline Neighborhoods should utilize traditional materials. Caution should be used when accepting new materials as their durability and longevity can be in question.

Contact Information

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