

City of Dubuque: Commitment to Historic Preservation

November 2021

INTRODUCTION

Dubuque, Iowa is a community well known for its natural beauty and its historic architecture that makes up much of the downtown and surrounding neighborhoods. As Iowa's oldest city, Dubuque's strong historic preservation ethic goes back decades.

The City of Dubuque is committed to identifying and conserving its cultural resources. We recognize that the historic, architectural and archeological resources of Dubuque are a key to our economic success and quality of life. These resources, like the Mississippi River, help form Dubuque's unique identity.

Historic preservation is the poster child of sustainability – with its economic, environmental, and cultural benefits. Preservation enhances the vibrancy of neighborhoods and cities, instilling pride and value through increased property values, as well as enhanced quality of life, sense of place and neighborhood pride. Preservation translates into economic prosperity through creation of new jobs, retention of existing jobs – especially in construction trades, stimulation of private investment, tourism and business growth, and financial investment in property improvements in Dubuque.

Dubuque's rise from its renown economic troubles of the 1980s was in part due to its recognition of and dedication to the notion that what makes us unique can be our source of strength. Instead of mimicking other communities or trying to reinvent ourselves, we turned to our foundation of our strong building stock and environmental and culture heritage. We set out to preserve what we have, make it functional for the 21st Century and enhance the community with sensitive and relevant infill development when warranted.

Dubuque has been continually in the forefront of historic preservation in Iowa and has received national recognition. With the City's commitment to education and training, the Planning Services Department and the Historic Preservation Commission can help identify treatment approaches, potential financial incentives, and other resources available to assist property owners.

BACKGROUND

The City's commitment to historic preservation began in the mid 1970's as the community reacted to the wholesale clearance of downtown blocks through urban renewal programs. As a result of the foresight of early leaders, Dubuque has one of the largest collections of historic building stock in Iowa. The community's commitment continues today and into the future with our focus on sustainability and resiliency.

The City of Dubuque has a historic preservation ordinance and a variety of preservation incentives that protect and enhance our community's historic resources and identity. The City has designated 5 local historic preservation districts, 9 conservation districts, 11 local landmarks, 19 National Register Historic Districts and 3 conservation planning areas supported by an active Historic Preservation Commission. There exists overlap between many of the conservation and historic districts.

Illustrated design guidelines are available for historic districts as well as the Downtown, Historic Millwork District, and older neighborhoods. The City has documented the historical and architectural significance of nearly 5,700 properties in Dubuque.

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Dubuque’s historic preservation regulations, historic surveys, and architectural guidelines are a resource to guide property owners, contractors, and design professionals with preserving and enhancing the historic characteristics of a building, in turn fostering neighborhood stability and community vitality.

Historic Building Rehabilitation/Preservation was named a Top Priority for 2021-2023 during annual goal setting by the City Council.

HISTORIC RESOURCES

In 1976, the Dubuque Architectural Survey was completed and conservation districts were established as precursors to historic districts. The City Council adopted a Historic Preservation Ordinance in 1977, and then established the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) in 1979 to assist in the review, retention and promotion of historically significant properties and districts in the city of Dubuque.

Survey/Evaluation Program

The City Council designated 5 local historic districts, 8 conservation districts, and 8 local landmarks from 1979 to 1984 based on the 1976 Architectural Survey. This inventory was bolstered after Dubuque’s many architectural themes and historic contexts were recorded in the 1999 Comprehensive Survey and the 2000 Community Assessment funded in part by the State of Iowa. This documentation is the foundation for phased historical/architectural surveys/ evaluations of our older residential and commercial neighborhoods. The City has retained consultants to survey and evaluate **5,653 structures** using local, state and federal funds.

Year	Phase	Survey Area	Buildings	Total Cost	Grant Amount	Grant Source
2000	n/a	Citywide	n/a	\$9,575	\$4,000	HRDP
2000	I	Couler Valley	993	\$20,583	\$8,700	CLG
2001	II	Eagle Point	2,092	\$28,258	\$18,753	HRDP
2003	III	Downtown / Old Main	647	\$28,000	\$18,000	CLG
2004	IV	4 Historic Districts	544	\$27,830	\$18,000	CLG
2005	V	Conservation Districts	452	\$21,975	\$14,437	CLG
2015	VI	North Couler Valley	925	\$13,213	\$0	n/a

Since 2000, based on the phased survey/evaluation program, the City Council has locally designated these additional resources: 1 new conservation district, 1 expanded conservation district, 3 local landmarks, 4 individual historic properties, and 3 conservation planning areas. In addition, the HPC was able to use the phased survey/evaluation program results for preparation of five NRHP historic district nominations that were approved in 2015.

Historical Resources Inventory

The **National Register of Historic Places** (NRHP) is a program led by the National Park Service to designate, coordinate and support public and private effort to identify, evaluate, and protect our

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country's historic and archeological resources. Many of Dubuque County's nationally recognized cultural resources are found in the City of Dubuque, including: 2 of 3 National Historic Landmarks, 1 of 5 archeological districts, 19 of 21 historic districts, and 48 of 61 structures individually listed in the NHRP.

Approximately 2,500 **National Historic Landmarks** are designated by the National Park Service as exceptional places of national significance. There are 25 in Iowa. Two of Dubuque County's 3 National Historic Landmarks are in the city of Dubuque: Old Dubuque County Jail and *William M. Black* steamboat.

The City Council has preserved 696 structures in **5 local historic districts**: Cathedral, Jackson Park, Langworthy, West 11th Street, and Old Main. In 2005, all 5 local historic districts were listed in the National Register and designated as Urban Revitalization Areas for tax abatement.

The City Council has designated **11 local landmarks and landmark sites**: City Hall, Dubuque County Courthouse, Old Dubuque County Jail, *William M. Black* steamboat, Shot Tower, Mathias Ham House, Julien Dubuque Monument, Four Mounds Estate, Eagle Point Park, Carnegie-Stout Public Library and Dubuque-Dunlieth Bridge. All 11 local landmarks also are listed in the National Register.

The City Council has designated **4 individual historic properties**. These properties are not of a landmark status or located within a historic district, but they do have prehistoric, historic, architectural, archeological and/or cultural significance. Two are also listed in the NRHP.

The HPC reviews demolition requests in the **9 conservation districts** designated by the City Council that protect 1,204 structures in the downtown and surrounding older neighborhoods outside of locally designated historic districts.

Design Review

In the locally-designated historic districts, landmarks, and individual historic properties, the HPC has design review authority for exterior alterations that require a building permit, are visible from the public right-of-way, and represent a material change in appearance. The HPC also reviews demolition requests for these sites. For exterior alterations that are not a material change or clearly conform with the established Architectural Guidelines, Planning Services staff can sign-off on the permit. These sites also are eligible for historic preservation funding.

Properties in a conservation district are subject to HPC review of demolition requests only and may be eligible for this funding. The Housing and Community Development Department reviews potential housing loss with demolition requests in the historic and conservation districts.

RESPONDING TO CHALLENGES

In the 1990's, historic preservation faced many challenges in Dubuque. Residents in two historic districts petitioned the City Council to be removed from these areas. The Historic Preservation Commission was overturned on appeal to the City Council for the demolition of two downtown commercial structures anchoring prominent corners in two other historic districts. Historic district property owners appealed to the City Council on the Commission's prohibition to install vinyl siding to abate lead-based paint.

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As a result of this series of events, the City Council determined that a renewed focus on historic preservation was needed and re-assigned the program to the Planning Services Department. In April 1999, the City Council directed the HPC to review and update the Historic Preservation Ordinance, and to identify solutions to the problems and deficiencies that caused the conflicts.

The HPC and Planning Services staff worked with historic district property owners, contractors, and representatives from the Dubuque Area Board of Realtors, Dubuque County Historical Society, and Dubuque Main Street. Based on the HPC's recommendations, the City Council adopted numerous measures in 2001 to encourage preservation over demolition -- using a "carrot and stick" approach of expanded incentives and stronger regulations.

Expanded Historic Preservation Incentives:

- Established Architectural and Streetscape/Landscape Design Guidelines.
- Created a Historic Preservation Homeowner Grant Program for low to moderate income households.
- Created a Historic Preservation Revolving Loan Fund for exterior improvements for property owners at any income level in the 5 historic districts.
- Expanded the Urban Revitalization Program, a 10-year city property tax exemption for qualified improvements to residential properties, to all 5 historic districts.
- Created the Historic District Public Improvement Program to provide matching grants for streetscape improvements in the 5 local historic districts and at landmarks.

Stronger Historic Preservation Regulations:

- Added a *Preservation Alternatives* step to the design review process, which requires a property owner to attempt to obtain financial incentives and restoration alternatives sufficient for the owner to earn a reasonable economic return.
- Prohibited *Demolition by Neglect*, to require owners of historic property to keep their real estate in good repair, to stop a small problem before it becomes a large problem, and to offer information and assistance on preventative maintenance with historically appropriate methods and materials.
- Initiated the *Boarded-Up Windows and Doors Ordinance* which prohibits boarded-up windows and doors on any building facade facing the street side of a property. The ordinance requires windows be maintained on street sides of buildings to combat the blighting influence boarded-up windows and doors have on buildings and neighborhoods.

Since these Historic Preservation Ordinance amendments and historic preservation incentives were implemented, the HPC has not been challenged by appeals to the City Council to waive standards for exterior alterations. Using this "carrot and stick" approach of expanded incentives and stronger regulations has helped create a positive image for historic preservation efforts and spurred other local initiatives in support of historic preservation in Dubuque and elsewhere.

PRESERVATION-RELATED PLANNING

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The City of Dubuque takes pride in our success through “People, Planning, and Partnerships”. Historic preservation is a key component of these initiatives.

- The City Council set long-range goals and objectives for historic preservation in the City’s 1995 **Comprehensive Plan**, reaffirming them in the 2002, 2008, 2012 and 2017 updates of the Plan.
- In 2002, the City Council adopted the **Port of Dubuque Master Plan**. The Port is home to several National Register properties and the *America’s River* project. The Master Plan provides for a dense urban development pattern reflective of Downtown Dubuque and supports a riverfront revitalization effort that includes cultural and heritage tourism as well as design standards that reflect Dubuque’s historic downtown architecture.
- The City Council recognized the importance of the historic, architectural and cultural resources of downtown and surrounding neighborhoods with the adoption of the **Downtown Dubuque Master Plan** in 2004. The Plan evaluates current conditions, catalyst opportunities, and barriers to investment for Downtown’s historic features. It also describes priority actions for protecting and encouraging redevelopment of historic resources in Downtown.
- In 2009, the City Council adopted the **Washington Neighborhood Strategic Plan** to directly address identified issues and to plan for an improved future for the neighborhood through a broad range of strategies. The Plan includes strategies for preservation and conservation of historic resources in Dubuque’s oldest neighborhood.
- The **Historic Millwork District Master Plan** adopted by the City Council in 2009 is intended to foster opportunities to retain, recruit and expand businesses, transforming over one million square feet of vacant and/or underutilized space into a “live, work, and play” community. The growing mix of office, commercial, entertainment, and residential uses is supported by the Plan’s unique melding of market opportunities, sustainable and architectural design, historic preservation, and sound planning principles.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

Design guidelines are in place for Dubuque’s historic districts, downtown, and older neighborhoods to protect and enhance their historic, cultural and aesthetic resources.

Architectural Guidelines

In 2001, the City Council adopted Streetscape/Landscape and Architectural Design Guidelines for the 5 local historic districts. In 2009, the City Council adopted a Downtown Design Guidelines Manual for both exterior architectural design and streetscape/landscape design.

In 2014, the City Council adopted Architectural Guidelines that updated and combined these earlier Design Guidelines for Historic Districts and the Downtown into one user-friendly manual. This manual was expanded to include sustainability and accessibility guidelines. It also regulates exterior alteration of historic structures community-wide when using public funds.

The 2014 Architectural Guidelines seek to balance objectivity with flexibility; i.e., to manage change so the traditional character of the area is respected while accommodating compatible improvements. They

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reflect our sustainability-oriented goals to promote economic development, enhance the image of the area, and reuse historic resources.

Old Town Neighborhood Site Design Guide

Adopted in 2009 as part of the Unified Development Code, these design guidelines for development in Dubuque's older neighborhoods provide form-based site design guidelines where strict application of "suburban-style" site design standards for new commercial, industrial and residential development are difficult to apply due to the dense development patterns of these older urban areas. They are intended to encourage new development that is compatible with historic districts, downtown, and older neighborhoods in conservation planning areas.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION INCENTIVES

Due to the commitment to historic preservation by the City Council, HPC, City staff, and neighborhood associations, Dubuque has one of Iowa's best preservation programs, with many financial tools available to help finance rehabilitation and adaptive reuse of historic structures.

Financial Toolbox

The City's Financial Toolbox is extensive, with federal, state, and local incentives available for qualifying projects providing new jobs and investment in Dubuque. New and existing businesses are eligible for these economic development programs, which provide assistance to areas that include all or part of the City's 5 historic districts and 9 conservation districts. The City also has created several financial incentives geared specifically to locally-designated historic properties.

The *Historic Preservation Revolving Loan Fund* provides 3% loans for 10 years for HPC-approved exterior changes in the historic districts and individually-designated historic properties, and to correct demolition by neglect violations in conservation districts. The program provides loans up to \$25,000 to property owners at any income level on a competitive and qualifying basis. Priority is given to projects that save, restore or reconstruct original building elements.

The *Façade Grant Program* is available for qualified façade renovations in the Greater Downtown Urban Renewal District. The grants are used to eliminate inappropriate additions or alterations, to repair facades to their historic appearance, to rehabilitate the façade to improve the overall appearance, and to install signage that meets the Architectural Guidelines.

The *Historic Property Tax Rebate Program* encourage property owners to preserve, rehabilitate, restore, and reconstruct historic properties in the Greater Downtown Urban Renewal District with rebates on new taxable valuation for eight years.

The City of Dubuque joined its local partners to support the retention of *Historic Tax Credits* on the state and federal levels, knowing the importance of these two tools to help local citizens and developers take on tough projects, restoring and revitalizing Dubuque's built environment.

BUILDING CODE OPTIONS

The City Council has adopted the Uniform Code for Building Conservation, the International Building Code, and the Dubuque Historic Building Code, created in 2003. The adoption of three building codes gives owners, contractors, architects and the Building Services staff alternatives when working with

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existing buildings. It also reduces the barrier (real and/or perceived) of codes when property owners are contemplating renovation of their downtown buildings.

PRESERVATION PARTNERSHIPS

The City of Dubuque prides itself on our community partnerships, and historic preservation is no exception. The HPC has found good community support and a strong funding commitment from the City Council and other partners at the local, regional and state levels for growing list of preservation tools and incentives.

The City of Dubuque participates in the **Certified Local Government (CLG)** program of the State Historic Preservation Office. The main benefit of being a CLG is that the City is able to conduct federally-mandated Section 106 reviews locally, as opposed to sending each project to the State. If projects had to be sent to the State, the amount of paperwork would increase significantly, as would the review time.

As a CLG, the City also is eligible for grants to conduct a variety of historic preservation activities. These have included development of design guidelines and the phased survey/evaluation program. The 2015 CLG grant partly funded an archeological survey/evaluation and NRHP nomination for Eagle Point Park, matched with an in-kind donation of professional services by a local preservation consultant. Generally, the City utilizes local support coupled with CLG Grants annually to support surveys, preservation plans and preservation education, like the example of co-hosting the Preserve Iowa Summit in 2020.

The City of Dubuque is a long-standing, award-winning **Main Street Community** working in partnership with the Iowa Main Street Office and Dubuque Main Street. In 1985 Dubuque was chosen by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, founder of the Main Street Program, to be one of the pilot cities for the new Urban Demonstration Program. Dubuque was one of the first five communities in the nation to receive the "Great American Main Street" award.

Dubuque Main Street is dedicated to the development and ongoing support of a vibrant downtown and serves seven downtown districts. Public/private partnerships and City investments have been key in the redevelopment of downtown. In recent years Dubuque has seen record amounts invested in building rehabilitation and façade improvements through our Main Street program, creating thousands of full time jobs and enabling hundreds of new business starts and expansions. The HPC partners with Dubuque Main Street during "Architecture Days" with presentation of the annual Ken Kringle Historic Preservations Awards.

In 2004, Dubuque was one of 8 cities with a **Cultural and Entertainment District** designated by the State of Iowa. The Cultural and Entertainment District has fast tracked downtown revitalization projects that used State tax credits.

Preservation Iowa was organized in 1991 as the statewide preservation organization to build partnerships that enhance our economic and cultural future through preservation of Iowa's historic resources. The City of Dubuque is an active member.

The **National Alliance of Preservation Commissions (NAPC)** is the only organization devoted solely to representing the nation's preservation design review commissions. NAPC provides technical support and manages an information network to help local commissions accomplish their preservation objectives.

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The City of Dubuque is an active member and hosted NAPC regional training workshops in 2008 and 2010.

In 2004, Dubuque was designated as Iowa's first **Preserve America Community**. Preserve America is a White House initiative in cooperation with the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation, the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the U.S. Department of Commerce. Designation recognizes communities that: protect and celebrate their heritage; use their historic assets for economic development and community revitalization; and encourage people to experience and appreciate local historic resources through education and heritage tourism.

In 2005, Dubuque was named as one of **America's Dozen Distinctive Destinations** by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the country's largest private, nonprofit preservation organization. This is an annual list of unique and lovingly preserved communities. Dubuque was selected from nearly 80 destinations in 44 states. In 2018, the National Trust featured Dubuque as the cover story in Preservation Magazine, entitled *Finding Dubuque*.

The HEART (Housing Education and Rehabilitation Training) Program is a public/private partnership that provides at-risk students with vocational construction training and education through the complete rehabilitation of blighted properties in Dubuque. HEART helps revitalize older neighborhoods, creating quality, affordable, historic homes for families that follow architectural guidelines for historic preservation.

Heritage Works, a preservation non-profit founded in 2015, facilitates collaboration for catalytic preservation and restoration projects; provides advocacy for historic preservation; and educates about Dubuque's rich historic and architectural heritage.

FACILITATORS FOR SUCCESS

For many years, the Planning Services Department has served as a facilitator more than a regulator by striving to reach a win-win-win for the property owner/developer, the neighborhood, and the community for historic preservation and development services.

Since 1990, Planning Services staff has coordinated and facilitated the Development Review Team with staff representing the Fire, Water, Engineering and Building Services Departments. These staff meet weekly with developers to discuss projects. Getting everyone in the same place (one stop shop) and engaged in open dialogue is extremely beneficial. This is the formula for Dubuque's redevelopment success, which in large part involves the adaptive reuse of Downtown buildings and sites.

In 2009, the City adopted the **Unified Development Code (UDC)** that updates and merges zoning, subdivision, historic preservation, and sign regulations into a user-friendly format that recognizes the diverse physical characteristics of Dubuque's neighborhoods, encourages planned and managed growth, reduces obstacles, and incorporates sustainable design and best management practices. The flexible parking standards help preserve the built environment and also help facilitate adaptive reuse projects. Dubuque also has a historic building code that offers flexibility from modern building codes.

The UDC incorporates by reference architectural and site design guidelines for development in older walkable neighborhoods where strict application of "suburban-style" site design standards for new development are difficult to apply due to the dense development patterns of these older urban areas.

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We want to encourage new development that is compatible with the “True Urbanism” of these neighborhoods.

The success of the City’s historic preservation program, however, lies more in our people than the codes or guidelines. In general, our approach is not to simply inform, but to facilitate and be a part of the project. Planning Services staff works hard to connect people to resources and incentives. We help facilitate federally-mandated Section 106 reviews for potential impacts to historic properties for City projects. Staff works closely and efficiently with property owners and developers and we invest a tremendous effort in our historic preservation program. We prioritize our survey and registration program which helps connect developers to historic tax credits.

FROM REGULATOR TO EDUCATOR

In 2010, the HPC recognized the importance of re-introducing an education and outreach component to their regulatory duties. At that time, it was understood by all that public outreach through education, promotion, and awareness was desperately needed to reconnect preservation with the public and advance the City’s preservation program.

Shortly thereafter, the HPC formed an Education Task Force. By 2013, the Task Force successfully created a promotional brochure, worked with the City Assessor to label historic district buildings on their website, and hosted educational events on researching property history and available financial resources. The Task Force leveraged private and state grants to convert historic city directories to digital format in 2013 and helped sponsor a series of historic wood windows workshops in 2014, led by non-profit partners.

In 2014, the City Council adopted new demolition regulations recommended by the HPC that have a two-part test: 1) Is the structure significant or not; and 2) If yes, is there a reasonable economic return based on uniform demolition review criteria. Decisions are made by the HPC.

In 2014, the City Council also adopted new Architectural Guidelines that offer a combination of *preferred approach* and *acceptable approach*. The “stoplight” format is intended to facilitate the planning, review and approval process:

- Green Light – the appropriate or preferred approach
- Yellow Light – may be an acceptable or alternative approach; however, further research and consultation with Planning Services Staff is needed
- Red Light - an inappropriate approach that can detract from a structure’s architectural integrity or may cause damage to a building or architectural feature.

HPC Work Plan

In 2014, the HPC voted in favor of transitioning the Commission from a role focused on design review to a role focused on education and outreach. The role is more reflective of all the duties and responsibilities of the HPC set forth in the Historic Preservation Ordinance. The transition also provides for design review at the Staff level which in turn better serves our residents.

To organize this new direction, the HPC developed a work plan for addressing issues and opportunities that strengthen the community’s preservation program. Each goal has 1 to 2 Commissioners as Champions, with Planning Services Staff assisting in implementation.

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The workplan identifies projects and goals under two broad categories: Outreach & Education and Survey & Registration Projects.

CONCLUSION

Historic Preservation is one of the most important tools for economic prosperity, environmental integrity, and social/cultural vibrancy. The greenest building is the one that is already built. As it does in other cities across the country, for decades historic preservation in Dubuque has served as a means for community education; downtown revitalization and neighborhood stabilization; attraction for tourism, job creation, film industry production; affordable, workforce and luxury housing; walkable neighborhoods and other contributions to community and economic development.

Dubuque is a tremendous example of “leading edge” preservation efforts that can be accomplished through leveraging funds and forming partnerships. The City of Dubuque’s array of historic preservation regulations, guidelines and incentives are not found in many communities. Dubuque’s programs can serve as a model for historic preservation commissions from across the country and are especially relevant for small to medium-sized cities.

Last, but certainly not least, nobody does it alone...People, Planning and Partnerships. Dubuque does partnerships perhaps better than any other community we know. The City’s commitment to historic preservation through regulations, guidelines, and incentives, and our active partnerships with local, state, and national preservation organizations, has created one of the strongest historic preservation programs in Iowa, the region, and maybe the country.