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## Historic District Homeowners and Commissioners Ask for Continued Preservation <sup>[1]</sup>

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**By:**

Dan Totzkay and Alice Dreger



*Above: Two houses in the Oakwood Historic District on Forest Street, which has a mix of owner-occupied and rented houses.*

Having already met for six hours, East Lansing's City Council decided just after 11 p.m. this past Tuesday to delay a vote on changing the boundaries of the Oakwood Historic District until May 7.

But before Council made that unanimous decision, a number of Historic District commissioners past and present ? as well as Oakwood homeowners ? communicated with Council to call for continued preservation.

Some Council members had previously questioned the need for Historic Districts <sup>[2]</sup> in East Lansing. Citizens who came out to support preservation of the Oakwood Historic District focused primarily on aesthetics and potential impacts on property value if the borders are reduced.

Not everyone who weighed in believes in preservation of East Lansing's Historic Districts. Homeowner David Shane wrote in from Chesterfield Hills <sup>[3]</sup> (a different historic district from Oakwood) to say he "would actually be OK with the complete elimination of the historic district designation." He said he believes owners should be able to do what they want in terms of how their houses look.

Dan Papineau wrote in from the Bailey neighborhood <sup>[4]</sup> (also separate from Oakwood) to say, "I'm ok with shrinking or reworking any historic district. I especially agree with Councilman Altman(n) that if any historic district restricts the ability to expand downtown development and expansion, they should be eliminated. I would like to see a bigger downtown area."

Papineau is Director of Tax Policy and Regulatory Affairs for the Michigan Chamber of Commerce.

But those writing in from the Oakwood District expressed support for their Historic District being maintained.

Oakwood resident Gina Shireman said she "moved here to be in a historic neighborhood." She asked that Council keep the district intact.

Shireman lives next door to Council member Ruth Beier. Oakwood resident Jj Kidder, who lives across the street from Beier, wrote to say <sup>[5]</sup> the Historic District was "protection for the equity of my house and property taxes."

Kidder says removing Historic District protections would create "a perverse incentive" for property owners including landlords to remove garages in favor of "open-air parking" pads which, Kidder says, do not "lend themselves to attractive neighborhoods that retain their property value."

Kidder asked for maintenance of the Oakwood Historic District, saying, "It is protection of the equity of my house and property taxes."

*Below: Rental houses near the homes of those who wrote to Council. These rental houses are maintained under Historic District code.*



Oakwood resident Ann Nichols wrote to say <sup>[6]</sup> that "My interest in preserving the historic districts goes far beyond the sentimental. The historic district is the sole protection for us against looking out to see American four-squares replaced by cookie-cutter townhouses. We are one of only two houses on this street that is *not* a student rental."

Like many in Oakwood, Nichols refers to her family as urban "pioneers" who "have put major time and effort into building relationships with every crop of new students in ways that make this street civilized."

Nichols won East Lansing's Crystal Award for her relationship-building work with student neighbors in 2008. She says that the porches maintained on these houses create relationships as "frequent spots for conversation." She asks Council that, "in weighing interests I ask that along with landlords and potential developers you remember that we are here, with a lot of skin in the game."

Oakwood resident Sante Perrelli previously told Council [7] he would like his three properties on the south side of Oakhill Avenue taken out of the district so that, if he wishes, he could pursue demolition and redevelopment of the properties without having to get Historic District Commission approval. Perrelli owns a rental house (on the left in the photo below), a house he occupies (on the right), and an empty lot next door. His properties are on the north ridge of Valley Court Park.



Three speakers who attended Council this past week – all past or present leaders of the Historic District Commission – asserted that Council was misinformed on the purpose and guidelines of the Historic District designation.

Michael Christianson, past Historic District Commission chair, said Council had a "lack of understanding or appreciation" of what Historic Districts represent. Christianson specifically cited some Council members' preferences [2] for rental restriction overlay districts.

He said these types of comments "seemed to suggest profound confusion" on the part of Council. Rental overlay districts restrict conversion from owner-occupied houses to rentals. They do nothing to stop landlords (and homeowners) from radically changing how houses look from the street, as the Historic District designation does.

*Below: Examples of rental houses in Bailey in an area not subject to Historic District rules about preserving the house's look from the street.*



Christianson explained how development can still occur in Historic Districts, albeit with some ?additional hurdle(s).?

Christianson also said, when he chaired the Commission, a boundary study regarding the Collegeville Historic District made recommendations that he believed were ?disregarded entirely by the Planning staff? and said that he, as chair, was never informed of follow-up. He suggested that this was a case of ?eliminating things seen as barriers to development? and stressed that

the designation of Historic Districts was a grassroots endeavor by residents.

Also speaking at the meeting was current Historic District Commission Vice Chair Diane Wing of Chesterfield Hills. Wing shared examples of renovated buildings, both residential and commercial, to show "what can and does get done" in Historic Districts. She showed examples of new construction allowed in historic districts "including the new-construction Chesterfield Hills house of Council member Shanna Draheim, built on a lot that became empty after a fire destroyed a house.

Draheim shared that, when she purchased the then-empty lot, she was told by "a lot of people you can't build on that lot." She explained that only one person came forward to build there previously, who "wanted to build a McMansion" and was "told it would not fly."

Draheim said that her experience of the process was "incredibly great and straightforward," and the only issue arose when the Commission wanted her to include a chimney "at least a faux chimney" on the new house. Draheim noted that chimneys (even fake ones) are environmentally wasteful. Draheim, who was building an LEED-certified house, said the Commission accepted her argument and "moved on." (The house is shown below.)



Draheim mentioned that windows were a consistent issue and asked Wing to address that.

Wing, saying she had not brought up windows since they are the "most controversial" requests the Commission receives, explained that older and especially wooden windows are actually more environmentally responsible than most modern windows, as they can be weathered and repaired, among other things, while modern vinyl windows can only be replaced. However, Wing insisted that "everything (decided) is on a case-by-case basis."

In an attempt to dispel myth, Wing explained that "houses are allowed to evolve" under the Historic District code. Porches are sometimes enclosed, additions made, and so on. She noted that only that which is visible from the street is regulated and emphasized that there was "plenty of opportunity for personal expression within Historic Districts."

Wing also shared an image of Cron Management's building at 117 Center Street (below) to

show an example of a commercial property that evolved under the Historic District. Wing provided this to show how a nonresidential property could be extended while maintaining the original aesthetic of the historic building.



Mayor Pro Tem Erik Altmann noted that one of Wing's examples, a development on Louis Street, was no longer in the Historic District and asked if the development could have happened if the pre-existing structures were not removed. Wing stressed that the owners could have come to the Commission and requested demolition of the previous structures.

In the Oakwood neighborhood, two older rental houses on Grand River Avenue were demolished to enable the West Village condo development in 2006 (shown below). This development, which wraps onto Hillcrest Avenue, was approved by the Historic District Commission because the style complimented the aesthetic of the Oakwood neighborhood.





The last member of the public to speak to Council was Jessica Flores, who is the current Chair of the Historic District Commission. Flores's comments echoed points made by Wing and Christianson, but additionally called on the City to step up to utilize grant opportunities provided through the Certified Local Government program [8], which serves to "help communities save the irreplaceable historic character of places."

Flores explained that this designation, which East Lansing holds with 29 other Michigan communities, could provide the City with technical advice on how to use historic preservation "as a smart planning tool in the community." Flores said she believes the City sees it now as a "hurdle or limitation."

Flores said that, in her time on the Commission, the City has never utilized these resources, including funding sources, and will no longer be able to if the Historic District designation is removed.

Flores criticized Council member Beier "who is the designated Council liaison to the Historic District Commission" for not coming to the Commission meetings, and said she hoped Council would pursue "a proper education" about Historic Districts as a tool for economic development.

Flores recommended using the available grant funds for activities like a wood window workshop. She said she believes that right now, the "City is planning for its people, (rather) than the people planning for their city."

Mayor Mark Meadows later said this was "dead wrong" and that "many boards and commissions make recommendation to Council." Meadows also said being elected to Council by the people means representing the interests of the people.

In looking ahead, Council member Aaron Stephens shared that he would be voting to approve the recommended changes to the Historic District boundaries, but only after canvassing the area

and hearing from a majority of residents about what decision they want.

Want to weigh in? You can speak at City Council's meetings [9] at the start of the meetings and contact Council through email [10]. You can also:

- see a map of the historic district here [11].
- see the City's page on "living in a historic district" here [12];
- see our last two reports on the Oakwood Historic District boundary discussions here [2] and here [13];
- see the boundary study committee's report here [14];
- see the State Historic Preservation Officer's criticisms of the report here [15].

*Disclosure: ELi has received donations from many individuals with properties potentially affected by Council's decisions about historic districts, including homeowners, landlords, and commercial property owners in Glencairn, Oakwood, Bailey, Chesterfield Hills, and College Grove. Ann Nichols is ELi's Managing Editor, and Alice Dreger, ELi's Publisher, nominated her for the Crystal Award for her work on neighborhood relations. Dreger also owns a house with Aron Sousa (her spouse) in the Oakwood Historic District. They are close neighbors of Ruth Beier (Dreger and Sousa live next to Shireman and across from Kidder) and donated \$500 to Beier's 2013 City Council campaign. ELi's regular reporters Chris Root, Karessa Wheeler, Ken Sperber, and Val Thonger also own homes in the Oakwood Historic District.*

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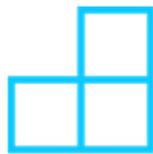
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