

City Council Work Session
October 3, 2022

The Fergus Falls City Council held a work session on Monday October 3, 2022, in the City Council Chambers at 4:30 pm to learn more about the National Registration of a Historic Downtown District. Mayor Schierer called the meeting to order and council members in attendance were Fish, Hagberg, Kvamme, Thompson, and Gustafson. Rufer, Arneson and Hicks were absent.

Earlier this year the Heritage Preservation Commission proposed designating the downtown as a historic district and the council requested more information before proceeding. Michael Koop and Ginny Way of the Minnesota State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) provided an overview of the National Registration of a Historic Downtown District designation, what it means, the process of obtaining the designation and expected timeframe. Way explained the National Register of Historic Places is the official list of the nation's cultural resources worthy of preservation. Properties listed in the register include districts, sites, buildings, structures, and objects that are significant in American history, archaeology, engineering, and culture that possess integrity of the location, design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling and association.

Determining if the downtown area is historically significant requires an intensive application process and gathering substantial amounts of information over an approximate two-year time frame. Criteria for evaluation includes the association with events having made a significant contribution to the broad patterns of history or are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past or embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction or possesses high artistic values or have yielded important information in prehistory or history.

If the city would like to pursue the designation of a historic downtown district, a boundary would have to be established. Properties within the boundary area may include buildings that are non-contributing to the period of significance, but the boundary must be contiguous. A majority of the property owners included in the boundary area must agree to the designation. Those who do not want to be included must submit a written and notarized letter of objection. Significant historic properties that fall outside the boundary, but that provide historic significance can be nominated for national registration status individually with the support of the property owner. The incentives to have a historic downtown designation includes historic preservation tax credits, access to historic and cultural heritage grants, support for local businesses, an increase in heritage tourism, environmental sustainability, and educational opportunities. Way reviewed several the frequently asked questions regarding nationally designated properties. SHPO is not the preservation police and if the property owner of a nationally registered property wants to tear the building down, it is their prerogative to do so. They are allowed to repair or maintain the property as they see fit unless they use federal or state funding. SHPO cannot enforce an owner to perform maintenance. Properties can be sponsored by a public entity or privately nominated for registration, but the registration will not move forward if the owner formally objects.

If the city would like to pursue a national registration of a historic downtown district, they would need to survey area and establish the boundary, significance, and criteria. Way suggested the city consider hiring a qualified consultant to perform the survey work as this work requires extensive and technical documentation, research and analysis and a conduit to the other entities during the review and guidance process. After this work has been prepared, it is sent to SHPO for review, guidance, and any objections. The State Review Board will then comment and make recommendations. The final step

is the review, comment, guidance, and final decision by the National Parks Service. Chris Schuelke of the Heritage Preservation Commission suggested the city consider hiring a consultant to have the best chance of success. The estimated cost of the consultant is \$20,000-\$25,000. Michael Koop commented the city's Certified Local Government status and the possible funding sources that may be available to hire a consultant. The grants would have a matching requirement and would staff time would be considered as a part of the matching funds. Applications are due annually in mid-January. Way spoke about the importance of public education and engagement throughout the process and confirmed if the city did the preliminary work, they would not be obligated to proceed with the final application. Various questions about the economic impact of nationally registered buildings, historic tax credits and various scenarios about rehab vs. repair of a structure were addressed. The council was in consensus to have the Heritage Preservation Commission discuss the issue and bring a recommendation to the council.

The meeting adjourned at 5:20 pm

Lynne Olson