

Decorah Historic Preservation Commission
Minutes of Nov. 21, 2024 Meeting (FINAL)

1. **Roll Call.** Meeting was called to order at 3:00 p.m. by Chair Mark Muggli. Present were commissioners Kathy Buzza, Adrienne Coffeen, Nan St. Clair, Judy van der Linden and Jenny Werner – Hayley Jackson was absent. Also attending were Decorah residents Deb Bishop, Donna Rasmussen and Terry Haindfield.
2. **Review of October 30, 2024 minutes distributed by secretary Judy van der Linden.** Judy will correct #7 in the minutes to indicate Nan was the November city meetings monitor. Otherwise, minutes were adopted as written.
3. **C-3/Commercial Historic District**
 - a. **202 E. Water St. (Decorah Bank and Trust) seasonal banner.** Members agreed that the bank could again display its temporary seasonal banner.
 - b. **400 W. Water St. (Lefse Lodge Kafe) sign.** Mark wrote the draft response for this sign permit application. Nan seconded the draft. Commissioners agreed the application was unclear on exact location and number of signs, but decided to assume it proposes three signs that would be located where the former Java John's signs were placed. Mark and members rewrote the motion to recommend that because of the proposed signs' strong colors, the largest, east-facing sign should be reduced in size by 50%. Kathy seconded the modified draft and members voted 6-0 to approve it (see response attached to minutes).
 - c. **City Manager and post-application project changes.** Mark talked to City Manager Travis Goedken about several downtown building projects that were changed by the owners after the city had approved them. Travis had not noticed the changes. He will make an announcement at the next City Council meeting expressing his concern about the number of building owners who are "ad libbing" their buildings rather than following the site plans.
 - d. **111 Winnebago St. update.** Travis confirmed to Mark that the owners of 111 Winnebago would not qualify for a city Downtown Economic Development grant because their repair project was essentially complete before they applied.
 - e. **110 Washington St. mural update.** A postage stamp mural has been completed on the rear (east) elevation of this building. Mark has seen and approves of it.
4. **Municipal Center memo.** Mark wrote this memo to city officials expressing DHPC's strong support for retaining the Municipal Center. Members suggested a few minor changes and Nan seconded the final draft. Members voted 6-0 to approve the memo (see attached). *Mark will send it to officials.*
5. **Oneota Historic Future Alliance (OHFA) potential collaboration.** Deb Bishop, co-treasurer and secretary of the OHFA, gave commissioners background on Decorah East Side School's demolition and the many uses of its salvaged materials, and described her group's plan to film a Ken Burns-style documentary about it. OHFA seeks collaborators – individuals or groups that will help fundraise, organize events, do publicity or marketing, work on story development, supply music and actually film the documentary. Commissioners were grateful to Deb for her work and for reaching out to DHPC, and said *they will consider if and how they might help.* Donna Rasmussen and Terry Haindfield attended the meeting in support of OHFA's plan.

6. **CLG Annual Report.** Mark said he will again write the required annual CLG report but he does not want to present it to the City Council this year. He requested that a commissioner volunteer by February 1 to do that.
7. **DHPC web updates.** Mark said he recently sent the city five updates to DHPC information on the city's website. He encouraged anyone who sees mistakes or omissions in DHPC information to let him know.
8. **Steyer Bridge sign update.** Mark reported that the sign has arrived and he suggested to park officials that it be installed before the ground freezes.
9. **Luther College National Register sign update.** This sign has also arrived, Mark has been told, but it hasn't been erected. Mark has written the college about putting it up.
10. **Significant Decorah Properties progress**
 - a. **Site Inventory progress reports.** Using research done by former commissioner Diane Scholl, Mark wrote and forwarded to Adrienne a Site Inventory (SI) draft for 909 Pleasant Ave. Adrienne also researched the home. She and Mark hope to have the SI completed soon. Also, Mark reported that he sent a link to the Trond Stabo house (404 5th Ave.) SI to a friend who mentioned Stabo. Nan said she lost information about the house she selected for an SI when her computer crashed. Anyone who sent her information about the house should contact her to resend, she requested. And Nan said she will try to get a copy of the recent presentation by Lindsey Row-Heyveld about Phelps Cemetery, in case any of those facts could be incorporated into a SI for the cemetery.
 - b. **Highlight property anniversaries (150, 100) on Facebook Historic Sites of Decorah and Winneshiek County**
11. **DHPC, City Council, Planning and Zoning, Board of Adjustment updates.** Judy will monitor city meeting agendas in December. **City Council** meets Mondays, Dec. 2 and 16 at 5:45 p.m.; **BoA** meets Wednesday, Dec. 4 at 5:15 p.m., and **P & Z** meets Monday, Dec. 9 at 5:30 p.m.
12. **Contacts**
 - a. **Decorah Treadle sewing machine offer.** Mark learned that Winneshiek County Historical Society does not have room for the sewing machine. Hayley will contact Decorah Genealogy Association next. Mark suggested Vesterheim may be interested. *He will ask city officials if the machine's original owners were Norwegian.*
13. **Continuing Education.** Mark asked commissioners to read the articles on pages 10 and 24 of the *Alliance Review: Telling the Fuller Story*, which was emailed to commissioners on Nov. 20. He may want to discuss the articles in December.
14. **Commissioner Reports.** **Judy** reported she toured 607 John St., home of David and Becky Kamm, who attended Mark and Judy's talk at DGA about old buildings and believe their home dates to the early 1870's.
15. **Public Comment.** There was none.
16. **Upcoming meeting: Thursday, December 19, 2024, 3:00-4:30.** Note the meeting date and time have been changed to work around Christmas.

17. Adjournment. Mark adjourned the meeting at 4:32 p.m.

November 21, 2024

TO: Decorah Building Officials Greg Swanson and Travis Goedken
FROM: Decorah Historic Preservation Commission <historicpreservation@decorah.iowa.gov>
TOPIC: 400 W. Water St. (Lefse Lodge) C-3 Sign Permit Application

NOTE: This sign permit application, originally included with a September 17, 2024 Site Plan permit application, was by mistake not included in the original materials sent to the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission. DHPC made a recommendation on the Site Plan alone at its October 30 meeting.

I. The Property

400 W. Water St. is an 1893 two-story, wood-frame, false-front building that has housed a shoe store, a furniture/mortuary business, a grocery, and in recent years a coffee shop and cafe. The building is designated a “contributing” building on the 2017 National Register nomination because it retains its original “size, scale, falsefront, and overall profile,” although the nomination notes that the wide siding is replacement and that there have been changes to both the storefront area and to the originally-exterior River St. second-story stairway. The nomination notes that the excellent research done on this building by Judy van der Linden would provide much information for a full-scale restoration.

II. The Proposal

The owner proposes a new 8’ x 12’ sign on the east building elevation, a 12” x 24” sign above the south main entrance door, and a 3’ x 6’ (“or smaller”) sign on the “back wall” (presumably the north elevation). Although the sign application is not clear about the exact sign locations, we are assuming that the three are intended for the locations of the signs from Java John’s, the previous business in this location.

III.

The red and blue signs, mimicking the Norwegian national flag design, will clearly identify the business focus of the Lefse Lodge Kafe and will introduce an unusually bold color combination into the Commercial District. (We base our judgment here on the Municipal Code language for building colors: “The color of buildings should work in harmony with other C-3 structures and should maintain the unique historic quality of the downtown. The accent colors should complement the primary color.” (Municipal Code 15.04.050.G)

The original Java John’s sign on the east building elevation, which the new sign seems to replicate in size, has always seemed to us very large—it was probably the largest sign in the downtown Commercial Historic District. The new sign, in bolder colors, and without the more

muted colors and the whimsy of the Java John's coffee cup design, is going to feel even larger. Given the unusually long 71' east elevation frontage, the sign does not exceed the City Ordinance 17.100.030 size limits.

It is unclear if the coffee cup on the ground level south elevation (without the Java John's name) is being retained, or whether this will be over-painted in "cream" (the paint color identified in the site plan).

At its November 21, 2024 meeting, DHPC voted 6-0 to endorse the Lefse Lodge's three proposed signs, while simultaneously making a strong recommendation that the proposed east elevation sign be reduced in size by 50%, especially considering the very bold proposed colors.

November 21, 2024

TO: Decorah City Council and Staff

FROM: Decorah Historic Preservation Commission

Over the last several years, DHPC has argued for the preservation of the Decorah Municipal Center, sometimes indirectly in our presentations on Charles Altfillisch's work, and more directly in our annual reports. We are therefore disappointed in recent Council discussions that indicate considerable support for demolition/new-construction. We want to outline here again our arguments for preservation. Please note that the following points are not presented in order of importance—in fact the separate points are only different aspects of a single intertwined argument.

History

Buildings are living history. The Municipal Center is not only one of the best designs of Decorah's single most important architect, it also represents the major changes in Decorah after the construction of the Dike system—which itself is often seen as Altfillisch's greatest single contribution to Decorah. The Dike led to the construction of a number of new buildings and a new road system to support this expansion of Decorah's downtown into what was a flood-prone, mud-filled area called the "Hitching Grounds." Of all the major new buildings (including the Post Office, two schools, the movie theater, and the Armory) that the Dike made possible, the Municipal Center is the most architecturally important and best preserved.

One challenge for appreciating City Hall is that most people think historical buildings are the

“really” old ones. It’s easy to forget that a historical building like the Hacker, Nelson & Co. building (123 W. Water St), which so many people now admire, was barely sixty years old when City Hall was built, about the same age as City Hall is now. In fact, the most vulnerable age for buildings is when they’re around fifty years old. They sometimes have mechanical problems, often due to deferred maintenance, and they are often the victim of changing tastes. That’s why the National Register includes buildings when they’re only fifty years old. But it’s also why in the last ten years or so we all are hearing so much more about the beauty of Midcentury Modern styling, prevalent roughly from the 1940’s through the 1970’s. You can see it in the decor featured in furniture stores like Jubilee in downtown Decorah and in the preserved buildings highlighted by the National Trust.

After fifty years with a building, people also get antsy for something shiny and new. Most of us, however, know an owner of a new home with plumbing or roof issues, and Decorah has a highly visible example that demonstrates that new is often not perfect: In seeking a \$1 million roof replacement for the Middle School building, Superintendent Tim Cronin pointed out that the building’s roof had leaked for 17 years since the building’s construction 18 years earlier.

Climate

Most people now believe that climate change is a huge crisis with huge costs. That’s why everyone recognizes the need for insulation and weather-tight windows. But more sophisticated analyses have demonstrated the environmental cost of demolition/new-construction. Demolition releases the carbon already locked into the original building materials and wastes the human and fuel energy that went into construction. New construction has huge energy costs in the production, transportation, and use of materials. Thus the statement of a past president of the American Institute of Architects: “The greenest building is the one that already exists.” (And he means that literally: a Leeds-certified building is in total more energy consuming than *any* building it replaces.)

Cost

Brunton Architects' \$15 million estimate for a new Municipal Center evidently seemed shocking to everyone, since the Council instructed the City Manager to get Brunton to whittle down the cost. But what about also whittling down Brunton’s estimates for renovation? Even better, how about engaging with architects who specialize in preservation and renovation? Such architects are available throughout the Midwest, and several have previously completed Decorah preservation/renovation projects. Brunton seems to pride itself on its new buildings and we doubt that they approach rehabilitation projects sympathetically.

Summary

Unlike some historic preservationists, DHPC has never argued that every old building ought to be preserved. In fact, we got a lot of flak when we endorsed the demolition of the Vesterheim Cary building to make possible the construction of the new Vesterheim Commons. Part of our job is to help the city identify buildings worthy of preservation. And we believe strongly that the Municipal Center ought to be preserved. We recognize the need for exterior refurbishment, for interior renovation, and for possible expansion. We support those kinds of changes. But handled sensitively, those changes can be done while preserving the building's most distinctive, character-defining features. Renovation and restoration would be much less expensive than demolition/new-construction, would demonstrate greater environmental responsibility, and would preserve this outstanding example of Midcentury Modern architecture by Decorah's most important architect.

Please know that we are eager to be of help during this decision-making process.

Thank you.

At its November 21, 2024 meeting, the Decorah Historic Preservation Commission voted 6-0 to adopt the above memo, which had been drafted and reworked by the whole Commission.
