

Decorah Historic Preservation Commission
Minutes of Jan. 29, 2025 Meeting (FINAL)

1. Roll Call. Chair Mark Muggli called the meeting to order at 4:30 p.m. Present were Kathy Buzza, Hayley Jackson, Nan St. Clair and Judy van der Linden. Commissioners Adrienne Coffeen and Jenny Werner were absent. *DecorahNews.com* reporter Alexander Rosenow was present.

2. Review of December 19, 2024 minutes distributed by secretary Judy van der Linden. Members agreed Judy could adjust wording slightly in #6. Minutes were otherwise approved as written.

3. Election of 2025 Officers. Current officers were elected for another year. Kathy nominated and Hayley seconded Mark as chair. Judy nominated and Kathy seconded Hayley as vice-chair. Mark nominated and Hayley seconded Judy as secretary; vote totals for each were 4-0. The nominated person abstained from voting in each case.

4. C-3/Commercial Historic District

a. 421 W. Water St. Site Permit application. Commissioners considered a complicated site plan with architectural drawings detailing the many exterior and interior modifications proposed for this building. Extensive pre-permit work has already been done. Mark wrote the response for the plan and Hayley seconded it. Members applauded and approved of Mark's response, suggesting only that the owner be strongly encouraged to install bird-friendly glass in remaining windows and in the proposed glass stairway/elevator tower. Permit was approved 5-0.

b. 115 W. Water St. sign review. Mark wrote the sign response and Nan seconded it. Commissioners voted 5-0 to approve the proposed sign.

c. 101 W. Water St. (Ulring Properties) site permit update. Mark reported that Planning and Zoning did not consider the site plan for this building at its last meeting. City Manager Travis Goedken told P&Z members both he and Mark had tried to contact Caleb Ulring and were waiting for a response, so the permit is on hold.

d. 400 W. Water St. (Lefsa Lodge). Mark asked what commissioners thought of this business' newly-erected sign. DHPC had recommended the proposed sign be much smaller, but the owners did not change it. Three commissioners think the sign is too big.

5. CLG Annual Report

a. Draft written report. This form on the state website was difficult to upload. Mark completed it, however, and commissioners approved of the content. *Mark will finish the last few items.*

b. Annual DHPC 2025 Work Plan (consult "Planning for Preservation" for guidance). Members agreed with Mark's proposed 2025 Work Plan, suggesting only that he add the commission's offer to help Oneota Historic Future Alliance as a potential project. The Work Plan was approved 5-0.

c. City Council oral report (Feb. 3 or 17). Hayley will present the report to the council on Feb. 17. Mark suggested she applaud city officials for creating the Downtown Economic Development Grant program and encourage them to scrutinize applications carefully to ensure funding goes to those offering the most positive improvements to the

C-3 district.

6. Annual Historic Preservation Award. Commissioners discussed possible 2025 awardees, including First United Methodist Church for tuckpointing and other improvements to the outside of the building, and Decorah United Church of Christ, where the roof was replaced and other exterior work may have been done – *Kathy will investigate the extent of UCC work and report back.* Mark also asked about 111 Winnebago St., owned and recently repaired at great expense by owners David Lester and Amalia Vagts. *He encouraged commissioners to compare the repaired facade to a photo of the original building on the NRHP downtown nomination.*

7. Project inventories from local crafters. DHPC will ask each crafter to provide an inventory of his/her projects that DHPC can share with other historic organizations. Members suggested these persons: Ted Wilson, Brian Betteridge, the former Timber Rose Construction (Dale Kittleson is the last associate), Kevin Lee, David Wadsworth. Mark will talk to Ted and Brian, Kathy will talk to Kevin and Nan will contact David.

8. Significant Decorah Properties progress

a. Site Inventory progress reports. Kathy, Jenny and Judy are each close to finishing new site inventories.

b. Highlight property anniversaries (150, 100) on Facebook Historic Sites of Decorah and Winneshiek County

c. Site Inventory 909 Pleasant Ave. update. Judy and Kathy collected additional information at the courthouse and Mark will incorporate that into this SI.

9. DHPC, City Council, Planning and Zoning, Board of Adjustment updates. Kathy will monitor city activities in February. Meeting schedule is: **City Council** – Monday, Feb. 3 and Monday Feb. 17, 5:45 p.m.; **Board of Adjustment** – Wednesday, Feb. 5, 5:15 p.m.; **Planning and Zoning** – Monday, Feb. 10, 5:30 p.m.

10. Contacts

a. Deb Bishop (Oneota Historic Future Alliance). Mark emailed Deb that DHPC could collate a list of where East Side School salvaged materials were used with one of the city's significant properties and sites, or a similar project. Deb will contact DHPC if OHFA decides to do such a project.

11. Continuing Education.

a. Kathy Buzza mini-report on “Navigating ADU (Accessory Dwelling Units) Development in Historic Districts,” NAPC Webinar, Dec. 12. Kathy watched this webinar and summarized for commissioners how the cities of Denver, Nashville and Louisville handle Accessory Dwelling Units within historic districts. Ironically, construction of ADUs was supposed to increase affordable housing, but in fact most of them are being used as short-term rentals. As Kathy reported, different cities regulate ADU's within historic districts differently, according to the structures' size, visibility, location on lot, design and other factors.

b. “Historic Resource Surveys: Unlocking the Foundations of Preservation,” NAPC Webinar, Thursday, January 30, 2025, 1:00 pm (EST). Four commissioners have signed up for this webinar.

c. Preserve Iowa Summit, Muscatine IA, June 5-7, 2025

12. Commissioner Reports. Judy said she told Midge Kjome recently about the Decorah Sewing Machine that city officials were contacted about last fall. Midge and Decorah Genealogy Association are collecting Anundsen family/*Decorah Posten* artifacts and history. She said the sewing machines were a “premium” for taking out a *Decorah Posten* subscription, and that the machines weren’t actually made in Decorah. She was interested in having the sewing machine. *Judy will check with Renee at City Hall to find out if the machine owner’s contact information might still be located.*

13. Public Comment. There was none.

14. Upcoming meeting: Wednesday, February 26, 2025, 4:30-6:00

15. Adjournment. Meeting was adjourned at 5:50 p.m.

January 29, 2025

TO: Decorah Building Officials Greg Swanson and Travis Goedken
FROM: Decorah Historic Preservation Commission <historicpreservation@decorah.iowa.gov>
TOPIC: 421 W. Water St. (Rowley Law) C-3 Design Permit Application

I. The Property

The J. J. Marsh Building (421 W. Water) is a major downtown building with a complex design history. After his original one-story wooden building on this location was destroyed by fire in 1895, J. J. Marsh built a two-story brick building that was later also damaged by fire. The brick building was repaired and enlarged in 1918. The current three-story building (with an additional fourth story and penthouse enclosure on the southern half) was complete by 1925. After 1979 there were major interior changes and a small one-story stone-facade addition on the north end of the east elevation.

The building has also had many uses: agriculture implement manufacturer, seed company, radio manufacturing and sales, soda bottling, National Guard (1968-79), restaurant and shopping mini-mall, lawyer’s offices (2009-present). Because of its overall integrity and its historic importance, the building is “contributing” on the 2017 NRHP designation.

II. The Proposal

The submitted site plan show multiple interior changes, a number of exterior refinements and window changes, and several notable exterior changes:

- Demolishing the metal fire escape on the south elevation and turning the fire escape door into a window;
- the addition of large metal balconies on the second and third story levels on the north

section of the east elevation, and on the second, third, and fourth story levels on the south section of the east elevation;

- the addition of a glass elevator shaft and stairway that rises up above the current roofline on the south section of the eastern elevation (just south of the “original” brick elevator shaft);
- adding small pre-fab metal canopies to the three entrances;
- adding a fence on the north and southeast sides of the courtyard that lies to the building’s east.

III. DHPC Response

Although we regret that the application does not include the required summary, the detailed Metrics Architecture site plan includes many details for proposed small and large scale renovations. But the work on this building has already gone on for years. After 2009 interior renovations were done floor-by-floor. In a 2020 letter, the City Manager encouraged the owner to develop a permit application after considerable exterior work had already also been initiated. In April 2021, DHPC evaluated a submitted building site plan. The plan included the opening of six bricked-in windows on the south elevation, nine new windows on the west and east elevations, and the size increase of two windows on the east elevation. DHPC noted the positive impact of many of these changes, but voted 7-0 to request greater detail. That Site Plan application was listed on the P&Z April 12, 2021 agenda, but was struck through on the final agenda because the application had been withdrawn.

But that April 2021 application led to some informal consultation between DHPC and the renovation contractor, Michael Owens. We explained the building’s history and showed him early photographs. Because of this conversation, Owens decided to install full-height window/doors with transoms on the east and west entrances and on the north and northwest elevations (where the April 2021 site plan had called for retaining the then-existent “half” windows, with a sun canopy and a large signboard on the north elevation). Owens also shared a subsequent CAD mock-up of a new glass 1.5 story conference room on the north section of the east elevation. This mock-up also included a four-floor stairway on the south part of the eastern elevation (approximately where the newly proposed elevator and stairway are located). At some point ca. 2022 the owner removed the 1979 one-story stone-facade addition from the northeast corner, and both interior and exterior work has continued sporadically since then.

All of this pre-permit work complicates our response to the latest application. We are pleased at the extensive and careful brickwork restoration that has been done over the years. We applaud the unbricking of the south elevation windows. We regret that so many windows on the whole building lack historically-appropriate glass and mullions, even though we applaud the round-topped windows used to fill the round-topped window openings. We accept the addition of new windows on the west elevation, all of which were careful recreations of the original west windows in size and in their brick caps and stone sills. The east and west entryways, the new east entryway in the location of the demolished 1979 stone addition, and the north and northeast elevation window expansions (with separate transom areas to evoke the original windows) all match our 2021 recommendations and are, we believe, highly effective.

The work proposed on the east elevation will create more window changes (mostly window

closings) and there will be doors opened up for the five new balconies. At this point, given the building's many window reconfigurations, we're complacent about these proposed changes, even though some of the abandoned windows are historical and the door openings are new. After all, as Jan Full noted in her National Register nomination, the building's "fenestration...is neither symmetrical nor balanced" and further changes on the east are perhaps not of great moment. (The north elevation window symmetry has, importantly, been preserved, and the west elevation window additions actually increase symmetry.) We respond similarly to turning the south elevation fire escape door into a window and enlarging or creating new windows on the ground and fourth floors of the south elevation. (The removal of the glass block in the fourth-story east and south windows is especially desirable.)

The modern glass elevator and stairway is a reasonable solution to the building's needs and an attractive alternative to the current south-elevation steel fire escape. The Federal Historic Preservation standards emphasize that building additions should be compatible with the original building, but should not be designed to fool the public and should therefore be easily identifiable—additions should be "compatible but not imitative." We believe this new glass and metal structure matches those expectations, even though it leans as far as possible away from "imitation." We appreciate greatly that the earlier brick four-story elevator enclosure and its two large impressive windows have been retained. The brick elevator shaft is historical and attractive and has some impressive interior features (although it is not clear that these are being retained). But the historical shaft will also helpfully obscure almost one-half of the depth of the new elevator and prevent it from dominating this important historical building. The metal balconies and the metal and glass elevator will effectively echo this building's historic industrial uses. The overall renovated building will be more "urban" than other downtown Decorah buildings, but will be compatible with the historic downtown and may feel aspirational to some other owners. DHPC does have one major caution: given the building's height and open location, we highly recommend bird-proof glass in all areas, as Michael Owens agreed in an informal conversation with us in 2021.

We were unable to find specifications for the courtyard fence, but want to note that fences in the C-3 district are limited to 4" height—the fences on the illustration seem closer to 6'. The sketch of the courtyard landscaping suggests the useful addition of two sizable trees, although we regret that this courtyard space will seemingly no longer be available for public use as it was when restaurants and bars were located on the building's ground and basement levels.

At its January 29, 2025 meeting, DHPC voted 5-0 to endorse the Rowley plan for the J. J. Marsh building, commending the owner for this major investment in Decorah's downtown, noting with regret the long delay in this permit application, applauding most of the final design choices, and strongly encouraging bird-friendly glass in all uncompleted fenestration, especially on the new elevator/stair enclosure.

October 30, 2024

TO: Decorah Building Officials Greg Swanson and Travis Goedken

FROM: Decorah Historic Preservation Commission <historicpreservation@decorah.iowa.gov>

TOPIC: 115 W. Water St. (Rendered Unique) C-3 Sign Permit Application

I. The Property

115 W. Water St. is an 1885 building that was used for at least 65 years as a grocery store before becoming the Sears Roebuck catalog store and then the “Bargain Outlet.” The building’s second story red and yellow brickwork is distinctive and well-preserved. The storefront was modernized in the 1930s by contractor A. R. Coffeen. The building is a “contributing” building in the 2017 National Register designation.

II. The Proposal

The building’s new occupant proposes a single large (5’5” x 3’) sign in the signboard area above the display windows. The single lettering coloring is not indicated, but it seems to hover between tan and golden yellow.

III. DHPC Response

The proposed sign, although larger than some downtown signs, will blend nicely with the building and with the commercial district as a whole. The golden/tan color will also blend with the areas designated for the new dark green color that the occupant indicated in a recent design permit (and which was endorsed by DHPC on Oct. 30, 2024), and will also be compatible with the building’s second-story red and tan brickwork. The business’s logo effectively contrasts—in font style, size, and density—the two words of the business name, and the proposed sign color will actually make the sign more “historical” than the multicolored logo featured on their website.

As we said in our Oct. 30 design permit response, we look forward to the day when the under-sized second-story windows are replaced with windows that fill the original distinctive tall openings. But we are, on the other hand, pleased to see a new business in this long-empty location and to see aesthetic improvements to the street level elevation.

At its January 29, 2025 meeting, DHPC voted 5-0 to endorse Rendered Unique’s sign proposal for 115 W. Water St.’s storefront area.