

**2010 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE CITY COUNCIL
HISTORIC & DESIGN REVIEW COMMISSION**

TO: Arcata City Council
FROM: John Barstow, Chairperson – Historic & Design Review Commission
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SUBJECT: Annual Report of the Historic & Design Review Commission
DATE: March, 2011

SUMMARY: The following is the annual report of the Historic and Design Review Commission (HDRC). The report format corresponds to the discussion items requested in the City Resolution No. 201-07, dated August 16, 2000.

DISCUSSION:

1. Progress on Goals:

On October 6, 2008, when the City of Arcata adopted the Land Use Code, the Design Review Commission (DRC) was renamed the Historic and Design Review Commission (HDRC), which was consistent with Arcata's General Plan: 2020 Design and Historical Preservation Element policies. HDRC membership was expanded from 5 to 7 members, allowing for additional Historic Preservation members, per General Plan: 2020 goals and policies.

However, the Commission experienced difficulties with the expanded Commission during 2009 and 2010. The Commission was only at full membership for one meeting, averaging two member vacancies for many months with difficulties finding enough qualified applicants for the positions. The vacancies resulted in lack of quorum issues for project hearings. In addition, the Commission Chair and members felt that meetings with additional members proved to be unwieldy to manage, took longer, and did not result in more effective project review, especially pertaining to historic resources. The Commission recommended changing HDRC membership back to five members.

In the Spring of 2010, the City Council amended the Municipal Code to return HDRC membership to 5 members. 2010 was a year of significant change in membership of the HDRC with three of the five members being new Commissioners. Concurrently, the City Council approved formation of the Historic Landmarks Committee (HLC) to satisfy Arcata General Plan: 2020 Historic Preservation Element goals and policies. The HLC consists of 5 members and the primary mission of the Committee is to work on historic preservation issues within Arcata.

Meetings

The HDRC conducted a total of 22 meetings in the past year. This included 20 regular meetings and two (2) special meetings: (1) one special meeting on February 17, 2010 that was rescheduled from March 10, 2010 due to lack of a quorum and; (2) a City Council Annual Study Session with the City Council, and all members of the HDRC and Planning Commission held on July 13, 2010. An additional Special Session held on March 1, 2010, involved the Chairs of City Commissions and Committees reporting to the City Council. The HDRC provided design review and assistance to 52 projects this year, from January 13 through to December 8, 2010: 21 residential applications, 20 commercial applications, 7 industrial applications, and 3 City/Other projects. Overall, the total number of projects reviewed by the HDRC slightly declined in 2010 (52) from 57 in 2009, reflecting a weaker economy and activity in the construction industry.

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In 2010, the majority of projects reviewed by the HDRC were approved (or continued as of the date of this report). One project which proposed demolition of a single family residence in the Bloomfield neighborhood was continued by the HDRC with Commission comments stating their opposition to the demolition request, and recommendations to instead rehabilitate the residence. The applicant subsequently submitted and received a building permit to rehabilitate the residence, and the project was completed. Two other demolition requests were reviewed by the HDRC in 2010. Approval to demolish a deteriorated storm shed for the Cypress Grove Creamery was approved by the HDRC with a condition requiring photo-documentation of the Storm Shed building and identification of key design features that could be incorporated in a new shed to be built in the future if desired by the property owner, and a condition relating to reuse and recycling of salvageable shed materials. The review of the LDS Church demolition request resulted in a recommended denial to the Planning Commission.

Goals

HDRC goals are established through policies in the Arcata General Plan: 2020 (GP: 2020), and implemented through the Land Use and Development Guide (LUDG) Section 4-0202 (in Coastal Zone areas), and the Land Use Code (LUC) Section 9.72.040 (in the inland areas within the City). Commission members and Staff are tasked with applying and becoming familiar with new LUC regulations applicable to development projects that require Design Review approval.

These goals are generally summarized as follows: to promote the orderly and harmonious development of the City; to promote the stability of land values and investments; to enhance the desirability of residences in the City; to promote visual environments of high aesthetic quality; to maximize the benefits of the natural assets of the community including access to solar energy; to protect scenic areas; to consider Arcata's unique architectural and natural setting; and to prevent excessive and unsightly grading of hillsides.

Historic Goals.

Specific historic goals and principles of the Historic and Design Review Commission include, but are not limited to, the following: Preserve the historic character of the Arcata Plaza and surrounding commercial areas; ensure that new development is compatible with the character of designated historic structures and Neighborhood Conservation Areas; prevent destruction of historic resources and encourage adaptive re-use opportunities; promote Arcata's history and historic building heritage; provide incentives to conserve historic resources, where possible, and; add to the City's designated historical sites list.

Several advances toward historic resource goals were made in 2010. Funding was approved in 2009 by the City Council for a comprehensive survey of historic resources located in Arcata's Neighborhood Conservation Areas (NCAs). In 2010, the City contracted with a historic resources consultant. Progress to date includes work on drafting a neighborhood context for the NCAs, updating and detailing inventory of historic resources in the city, and identifying architectural styles, design elements and character-defining features for existing structures found in the Bayview NCA. This data is to be included in survey forms used in the field survey, which is scheduled to commence in the Spring of 2011. This survey will provide additional resources and tools to improve project review and information for staff, project

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applicants, and Commissioners and will be a major step forward in meeting community goals relating to historic resources.

In 2010, Staff attended a Historic Preservation Conference held in the historic town of Grass Valley and hosted by the California Preservation Foundation.

HDRC Review

The HDRC's responsibility is to consider these goals and numerous design aspects when reviewing projects. It is a complex, multi-faceted, and in-depth review process that involves making site visits, and studying site plans, building plans, elevations, landscape plans, building colors, building materials, lighting, and signage. The HDRC also considers neighboring uses, pedestrian, bicycle and vehicle traffic circulation, green building principles and energy efficiency, and historic resources as applicable. Furthermore, each project is reviewed for compliance with other federal, state and local regulations, such as the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). After consideration of these issues, the HDRC makes recommendations, giving the applicant suggestions for design improvement, or requiring specific modifications. In all cases, HDRC's decisions are made with the consideration of project compliance with goals and standards outlined in LUDG, LUC, and GP: 2020, the applicant's project needs, and the visual aesthetics of the City.

2. How Community/Citizen needs are being met:

The HDRC is concerned with meeting the needs of the community as a whole as well as the individual needs of each applicant. It should be recognized that much of the "quality of life," for which the City is widely recognized, is the result of HDRC's implementation of the design considerations included in the LUDG, LUC, and GP: 2020. Building design, landscaping, and the integration of these components into existing and newly developing neighborhoods is the challenge that HDRC has addressed over the years. With the review of each project, their goal is to provide a comprehensive review that will in turn, enhance the surrounding neighborhood and improve the visual quality of Arcata.

Staff works with project applicants on an individual basis and also with the HDRC directly with the applicant at each Commission meeting. HDRC receives input and comments from the applicant and public members, considers project needs and constraints, and balances these constraints in relation to requested modifications. HDRC is careful not to create undue hardship to the applicant while working with each applicant to meet the goals and standards as stated in the LUDG, LUC, and GP: 2020. Commission members bring specific areas of expertise to the HDRC and this level of project design experience frequently results in project improvements for the applicant.

In some cases the applicant is resistant to the quasi-judicial and discretionary role the HDRC has in reviewing private and public projects. Project applicants may find the process an additional step that adds time delays and costs to their projects. However, HDRC often receives positive feedback from project applicants and citizens when they realize their input has helped to make their project better. In terms of planning approvals, the Design Review process may be considered to be a relatively fast-track planning permit process with most small Design Review projects having an average turnaround time, from application submittal to permit approval, of 4 to 6 weeks. In addition, professional architects and designers may avail themselves of the service that the HDRC provides for preliminary design review of their

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projects. Individually, the HDRC probably plays the biggest role on how Arcata looks visually. It is often a fine line between meeting the interests of the applicant, immediate neighbors, and the community at large.

Environmental Review

The environmental review revisions to the HDRC process were brought about in 2008 by community concerns that the HDRC did not have the technical background or experience in reviewing projects for compliance with CEQA. Since the Fall of 2009 and through 2010, reformatted HDRC project analysis aimed to assist project review for Commissioners, and changes to liaison support have added more than 20 years of CEQA experience from the Staff level to the HDRC. Additional training for the CEQA review process through workshops and self-instruction/training programs is recommended for the HDRC due to new Commission membership but should also be on-going to stay current with CEQA review.

Design Awards

The HDRC considered a list of potential candidates in 2009 for the Design Awards for projects that exemplify the design goals of the City of Arcata. However, significant changes to HDRC membership (Commission resignations and new appointments) in 2009 and 2010, and changes HDRC meeting format requiring additional time and attention to the process, led to deferral of the Design Awards in 2010.

3. How the responsibilities of the Commission are being fulfilled:

The HDRC is considered to be the City Commission that is the most experienced in assessing a project's design, addressing neighborhood compatibility issues, and making findings regarding Neighborhood Conservation Areas, designated Landmark Historic Preservation structures, and other historic resources. The HDRC's membership has specific expertise in the fields of historic preservation, building construction and energy efficiency, architecture, and landscape design to evaluate projects that fall under their purview.

HDRC's membership is informed, creative, and committed, and brings specific interests and knowledge to each project that is reviewed. In order to improve the effectiveness of the HDRC, the Commission membership was reorganized and reduced from 7 to 5 during 2010. Other measures included revised meeting format, use of visual aids for projects, online posting of meetings and projects, and televising the HDRC meetings that collectively have resulted in improved information and accessibility of Commission meetings and project hearings for Commissioners, applicants, citizens and the general public.

4. The effectiveness of the policies and procedures:

HDRC Meetings

Beginning in the Fall of 2009, format changes were introduced to the way HDRC meetings were previously conducted. In order to improve public participation, meeting information and transparency, and to provide the opportunity for an informed decision-making process, procedural and technological changes were introduced at the HDRC public hearings. The introduced changes incorporated procedures similar to those found in public hearings before the Planning Commission and the City Council.

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2010 was a year of adjustment to the procedural changes for the HDRC. Commissioners were seated at the dais with microphones, instead of the former layout where Staff, Commissioners and applicants were seated around one large table. Staff and applicants are seated at different tables, and members of the public speak at the podium. All projects are presented in Powerpoint format, and typically include slides of project plans and photographs of the project site and surrounding neighborhood. This visual presentation format allows Commissioners, Staff, applicants and audience members to view and participate in projects in a much more accessible manner than before. The meeting format and technology changes will continue to be monitored and reviewed in order to continue the improvements achieved so far in the functioning and presentation of HDRC meetings.

In August, 2010, HDRC meetings were televised and broadcast live on public access television and on-demand video streaming on-line. The video streaming was provided by Granicus, a web-based streaming media service contracted by the city of Arcata, that provides on-demand streaming media, distribution, posting of meeting agendas and project materials, archiving and other communications management tools for Arcata's City Council, Planning Commission and Historic and Commission meetings. This service allows city meetings, agendas and projects to be highly accessible to Commissioners, Staff and the public.

Over the past year, project checklists have been revised by Community Development Staff to improve legibility and ease of interpreting project requirements for applicants. The checklist includes a request for applicants to submit drawings in electronic format. These checklist revisions aim to improve the visual quality and legibility of plans presented to the Commission at the meetings. This is an on-going goal and challenge for planning Staff to get better project design and more complete submittals for Commission review.

Design Manual.

In 2010, there was little progress made on development of a Design Manual, which was identified by the HDRC in past years to be to be a high priority project. The intent of a Design Manual is to provide an illustration of key design considerations for development in Arcata that would also serve as a useful tool to help applicants understand the Design Review process, clearly identify the required application materials to reduce a project's processing time and minimize delays. The manual would also provide appropriate examples of desired development design to illustrate key design principles in an effort toward improving project design. It is anticipated that the HDRC will revisit the priorities of developing a Design Manual in 2011.

5. Recommendations:

The HDRC has the following recommendations:

1. Provide funding and other resources for the preparation of Arcata's Design Review Handouts.
2. Continue to expand training opportunities, especially for CEQA training.
3. Continue to acknowledge exemplary projects through the Design Award program.
4. Consider replacing "Type B" Planning Commission Reviews and Zoning Administrator Reviews of Minor Use Permits with reviews and actions by the HDRC.