

Decorah Historic Preservation Commission
June 30, 2021 Meeting Minutes (FINAL)

1. **Roll Call.** Chair Mark Muggli called the meeting to order at 4:15. Adrienne Coffeen, Hayley Jackson, Steve Kelsay and Judy van der Linden were present; Diane Scholl and Mark Branum were absent. Decorah resident Janelle Pavlovec attended.
2. **Review and approval of June 9, 2021 minutes, distributed by DHPC secretary Judy van der Linden.** Mark recommended a paragraph be added to item 5.c. that would explain P&Z's decision about the proposed Vesterheim mural. There were no objections. Mark declared the minutes approved with that addition.
3. **Decorah Railroad project.**
 - a. **Update on Water St. Depot project.** Mark reported the project is at a standstill for now. City engineer Jeremy Brill is waiting for permission from Scott Johanningmeier to assess the quality of the railroad track outside Johanningmeier's building.
 - b. **David Wadsworth and Railroad Ave. Combination Depot tour.** Diane and Mark were the only commissioners who attended David's tour. Mark said portions of the building look very nice, others are very rough. At some point DHPC needs to decide whether to accept the building from David. *Judy will organize a second tour so more commissioners can see the building.*
4. **Preserve Iowa Summit, June 3-5, recap.** Commissioners who registered for the summit have received a link to videos of all presentations, accessible through Aug. 31.
5. **Charles Altfillisch project.** Commissioners discussed how to proceed with the project in order to wrap it up. Mark reported that Jon Pankow offered to upload DHPC's web content to the city of Decorah's website so it's accessible to the public. To complete entries on some properties, *Hayley offered to write up the Davidson house and Altfillisch's Mound Street home, and Mark will encourage other commissioners to work on specific properties. He will also ask Deb Paulson about producing the 11" X 17" Altfillisch brochure.* Mark reported that Cindy Womeldorf has been using courthouse records to connect some residents' names with Altfillisch homes. He also determined the home at 301 Pershing was not designed by Altfillisch.
6. **Contacts.**
 - a. **DecorahNews June 24 editorial and June 27 Muggli response.** Mark responded to Paul Scott's editorial about whether ugly buildings can be protected because they have historic significance (see attached response).
 - b. **JoAn Stevenson, 702 Center Ave., concerning porch on Altfillisch house.** *Mark will email his comments about JoAn's porch to her and Steve will deliver his sketch of a proposed porch remodel and talk to JoAn.*
 - c. **Decorah Newspapers interview with MZM on Vesterheim plans.** Mark was interviewed about Vesterheim's project and told the reporter he was pleased the museum has involved DHPC as its plans develop. The reporter's notes have been turned over to another writer. Mark hopes the article will be developed.
7. **Commissioner Reports.** Mark reported that he took a trip to see Dubuque's building murals. He felt the murals were less attractive and pretty overwhelming in person.

8. **Public Comment.** Janelle wondered what Dubuque would do about murals once they begin to deteriorate.
9. **Possible upcoming meeting, Wednesday, July 28, 2021, 4:00 pm.** The July meeting date is tentative because Mark will be out of town. DHPC may need to meet to develop a P&Z permit response. Commissioners should plan on meeting on July 28 for now.
10. **Adjournment.** Meeting adjourned about 5:30 pm.

(The following is a Letter to the Editor from Decorah Historic Preservation Commission chair Mark Z. Muggli):

"On June 24th, Paul Scott published a commentary titled, "Can an ugly building be declared historically significant?" The 1966 National Historic Preservation Act identifies different

qualities that might support "historic significance," including historical, social, or cultural importance, associations with important figures, craftsmanship, uniqueness of structure or materials, or architectural distinctiveness. So, yes, a building that Paul Scott thinks is ugly might easily have historic significance.

One problem is that our definition of "ugly" changes over time. New York's Pennsylvania Station was built in 1910, came to be thought of as ugly and ungainly, was destroyed 53 years after it was built, and has been lamented ever since. The Greek-columned Winneshiek County Bank was completed in 1912, was demolished 49 years later in 1971, and has been similarly lamented. It is actually uncanny how many buildings in America are considered ugly or dispensable about 50 years after they're built. And then 50 years later, the ones that survive sometimes come to be considered irreplaceable gems.

It is also true, as Paul suggests, that owners have many rights over historic structures. In fact neither the Post Office (1963; architect, Mid West Texas Contracting Company) nor the Municipal Center (1960; architect Charles Altfillisch) is on the National Register of Historic Places. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't hesitate before demolishing them. Our needs or tastes may change. And a building's demolition—however energy efficient its replacement—is a dramatically unsustainable act.

Historic Preservationists recognize that some buildings should not or cannot be preserved, either because they were originally low quality, have become unsound, or are for some other reason non-rehabilitatable. But America—and Decorah—has far too often, and much too quickly, disposed of its built inheritance, sometimes in the name of progress, and sometimes just because we're short-sighted."