

Decorah Historic Preservation Commission
Minutes of Feb. 28, 2024 Meeting (FINAL)

1. **Roll Call.** Chair Mark Muggli called the meeting to order at 4:30 pm. Present were Kathy Buzza, Adrienne Coffeen, Hayley Jackson and Judy van der Linden. Commissioners Diane Scholl and Nan St. Clair were absent.
2. **Review and approval of January 31, 2024 minutes, distributed by secretary Judy van der Linden.** Minutes were approved as written.
3. **Janelle Pavlovec.** Janelle died February 9th. She frequently was the only member of the public to attend DHPC meetings and often had interesting or insightful comments on commission business. Members expressed their appreciation for Janelle's attentiveness to DHPC's work and to preservation in general.
4. **C-3/Commercial District**
 - a. **401 W. Water St. (Rilling Family Chiropractic) sign permit application.** Mark wrote the response to this sign application. Commissioners voted unanimously 5-0 to deny the application on the basis of the size and location of the proposed sign (see attached response).
 - b. **Electronic/digital signage update.** Mark reported that he spoke during a public hearing on electronic/digital signage on Feb. 19, affirming that DHPC appreciated the exclusion of digital signs from the C-3 district. In a surprising move, council members asked that the Board of Adjustment no longer have the ability to grant exceptions to digital sign rules. And, four of seven council persons indicated an interest in banning all new digital signs from the entire city. Commissioners agreed to weigh in on the possible ban. *Mark will write two letters, one to the council and one to P&Z, saying DHPC is very sympathetic to a ban of digital signs throughout Decorah. He will give members a chance to edit them before sending.*
5. **DHPC 2024 Historic Preservation Award.** Members voted 5-0 to plan three recognitions before midsummer. They will recognize Lois and Dean Humpal with the DHPC 2024 Historic Preservation Award for the couple's restoration of Altfillisch and other historic homes (*Judy and Adrienne will meet with them to ask if they'll accept the award and to learn more about their projects*); they will write a commendation honoring Janelle Pavlovec for her long interest in historic preservation; and commissioners will write a newspaper article or scavenger hunt brochure about transom windows in Decorah, in an effort to start a "Recovering the Transoms" movement among building owners.
6. **DHPC Annual Tasks**
 - a. **Annual City Council oral report (Feb. 19 report is at [DHPC City Council Report CLG Feb. 19, 2024 - Google Docs](#)).** Mark said his oral report to the council was well-received and that Mayor Lorraine Borowski complimented DHPC's efforts. But he also said he'd like someone else to deliver the report next year.
7. **Decorah 175th Anniversary (1924).** There was no report.
8. **Luther College Campus Historic District signage.** Wording is still being decided for what will be two signs, one of brass and one larger directional sign.

9. **Steyer Bridge sign project.** Mark reported that he wrote to Jeremy Brill, thanking him for his work with DHPC. Jeremy said the city will still fund one of the two planned signs for this project. Mark thinks one sign should include a good quality photo of the Steyer Bridge keystone when its words were still clearly legible, and commissioners agreed. *Kathy offered to look for an appropriate photo.*
10. **Significant Decorah Properties progress**
 - a. **Site Inventory form**
 - b. **Site Inventories in progress (March 2 drafting party).** DHPC members will meet Saturday, March 2, from 10 am- 12 noon at First Lutheran Church, 604 W. Broadway Street. Enter via the northwest door off the alley behind the church.
 - c. **Highlight property anniversaries (150, 100) on Facebook Historic Sites of Decorah and Winneshiek County**
11. **Decorah Demolition permit process.** There was nothing to report.
12. **DHPC, City Council, Planning and Zoning, Board of Adjustment updates.** *Nan will monitor these groups' agendas and minutes in March; Judy will do so in April.*
13. **Contacts**
 - a. **Travel Iowa Insider Meeting, Decorah, Feb. 27-28, 2024.** No commissioners attended this meeting.
 - b. **Introduction to Planning and Zoning Workshop for Local Officials.** Mark plans to attend the workshop. Others interested can contact him and Travis Goedken. **(presented by Iowa State University Extension, Hotel Winneshiek, April 25, 2024)**
 - c. **Preserve Iowa Summit, Mount Pleasant IA, June 6-8. 2024**
14. **Commissioner Reports.** Judy noticed that American Family Insurance, 122 E. Water St., has a large computer monitor in the storefront window that is lit and scrolls through photos and information at night. She thought this seemed like a digital sign, which is not allowed in the C-3 district.
15. **Public Comment.** There was none.
16. **Upcoming meeting: Wednesday, March 28, 2024, 4:30 pm.**
17. **Adjournment.** Meeting was adjourned at 5:58 pm.

February 28, 2024

TO: Decorah Building Officials Greg Swanson and Travis Goedken
FROM: Decorah Historic Preservation Commission <historicpreservation@decorahia.org>
TOPIC: 401 W. Water St. (Rilling Family Chiropractic) C-3 Sign Permit Application

I. The Property

401 W. Water St. is a multi-suite office building placed within what was originally a 1949

Streamline Moderne gas station. Because the lot and building still clearly reveal the original gas station, the property is considered a “Contributing” building within the 2017 National Register of Historic Places Decorah Commercial Historic District. Like the Water St. gas station sites now occupied by Don Jose Family Mexican Restaurant and the Viking Bank, 401 W. Water is one of a handful of Commercial district properties with a Water St. street cut and parking between the Water St. sidewalk and the building itself.

II. The Proposal

Rilling Family Chiropractic proposes a 48” x 60” internally-lit LED cabinet sign that includes the business name and three blue business images.

III. DHPC Response

401 W. Water St. poses challenges for a new sign. The Marine Corps Career Center already has a large internally-lit lettered sign stretching across the two large north-facing eastern building windows, and Viking Realtors has a large (ca. 60” x 48”?) rectangular internally-lit cabinet sign over the door between the north-facing western windows. Rilling Family Chiropractic has proposed adding a large sign above the other north-facing doorway. Unfortunately, the doorway includes a recessed area above the door (with some kind of air-intake?), which pushes the sign nearly to the roofline.

The 2022 C-3 guidelines note that “Internal [sign] illumination is not always appropriate and will be carefully reviewed.” It would be unfortunate if most new Commercial District sign applications were for internally-lit cabinet signs. In fact, most applications in the last few years have been for blade or applique signs, often with external lighting fixtures—that is the pattern on most buildings on both sides of the 400 W. Water St. block. And since the two other signs on 401 W. Water are internally lit, the proposed sign does offer some visual continuity on the building itself.

But whatever the sign type, the size and placement make the proposed sign very problematic. Obviously the new business owner wants visibility. But we have some suggestions that we hope the owner will consider:

1. Reduce the sign size in order to leave space above the doorway, and, more importantly, below the roofline.
2. If simply reducing everything on the sign seems problematic, the large lettering could be retained, but the image at the top of the sign could be reduced in size.
3. A third, less desirable possibility would be to keep the proposed 48” x 60” sign, but to move it down away from the roofline. That would mean that the sign would overlap the recessed space above the doorway, which isn’t ideal, but would be preferable to the proposed placement. This lower placement, however, assumes that the vent in the recessed area needs only minimal airspace, and we simply don’t know whether that is true.

At its February 28, 2024 meeting, DHPC voted 5-0 to deny the signage proposed for 401 W. Water St. (Rilling Family Chiropractic), encouraging the city’s building officials to consult with the owners about the proposed sign’s size and placement.