

Decorah Historic Preservation Commission
Minutes of March 27, 2024 Meeting (FINA)

1. Roll Call. Meeting was called to order at 4:30 p.m. Present were commissioners Mark Muggli, chair, Kathy Buzza, Adrienne Coffeen, Hayley Jackson, Nan St. Clair and Judy van der Linden: Diane Scholl was absent. Also present was Alex Rosenow, reporter for *decorahnews.com*.

2. Review and approval of February 28, 2024 minutes, distributed by secretary Judy van der Linden, and acknowledgement of March 2, 2024 Work Session on Site Inventories. Feb. 28 minutes were approved as written.

3. C-3/Commercial District

a. 201 W. Water St. (JNC, LLC) design permit application. Mark wrote the response for this application (see response attached at end of minutes). Owners propose to add one entryway, add painted stucco trim around windows, paint all three portions of this large building with different colors to distinguish them from each other, and paint two or three new murals on the east-facing elevation, where there is one mural already. Because of the complexity of the application, commissioners discussed and voted on it section by section. All commissioners agreed the addition of the entryway and stucco window trim were desirable. While they also agreed it was acceptable to paint the building exterior, they disagreed on the selected colors for different reasons. Kathy expressed what several commissioners thought – that the three colors were not harmonious with the rest of downtown. Mark and Hayley believed they were acceptable, but the only consensus reached on color was that muted versions of the three would be acceptable on the building sections. Regarding the proposed murals, Mark noted the application was flawed because it did not make clear what owners will do about the Carl Homstad mural already on the east facade. Members disagreed on the acceptable number of murals on that facade, but all agreed the owners should make an effort to restore and keep the Homstad mural. More members thought a maximum of two murals on that facade was sufficient, and encouraged the owner to choose a new mural that would complement the existing Homstad mural.

b. 202 W. Main St. permit application update. Commissioners didn't feel it was necessary to weigh in on this application. Mark said the building administrator is working with the owner of 202 W. Main St.

c. Electronic/digital signage update. Mark reported that he sent DHPC's comments supporting a digital sign ban to city officials but got no reply. He said some Planning and Zoning commissioners were upset with the city council at its mid-March meeting for not endorsing P&Z's recommendation to allow digital signs in parts of Decorah. The council's March 26 working meeting included the topic of electronic and digital signs. (Reporter Rosenow attended that meeting and said the council continues to lean toward banning digital signs.)

4. DHPC 2024 Historic Preservation Award

a. Awardee. Dean and Lois Humpal and their daughter Chanda will accept the 2024 award. Adrienne and Judy met with them on March 25.

b. Event date and location. Adrienne, Judy and the Humpals suggest the award ceremony be held Wednesday, May 22, in the late afternoon. Location may be city hall. Mark noted that DHPC may have to hold a short meeting on May 29, regular meeting date, if there is a C-3 permit application to be considered. *Judy, Adrienne and Kathy will work on a slide presentation of the Humpal's projects for the award ceremony. Judy will write a press*

release about the award, to be submitted to the newspaper between the 5th and 10th of May.

5. Decorah 175th Anniversary (1849-2024). Mark, Judy and Adrienne will attend the anniversary organizational meeting on March 29. Mark has offered an event for the anniversary – a survey of very early Decorah buildings. Judy proposed DHPC should offer just that one event as the commission’s contribution toward the anniversary. She offered to help Mark with it. Adrienne suggested DHPC also have the commission’s former architectural scavenger hunt brochure reprinted for the occasion, and members agreed. *She will ask Jessica Rilling about money to reprint it.*

6. Luther College Campus Historic District signage. There’s been no further progress.

7. Steyer Bridge sign project. Mark encouraged members to continue adding what they can to DHPC’s Steyer Bridge document. Nan and Diane will work more on the CCC angle. Judy suggested they check Decorah Genealogy Association for information.

8. Significant Decorah Properties progress

a. Site Inventory form

b. Site Inventories in progress (March 2 drafting party). Commissioners said they are moving forward on various site inventories. Mark is working on one for 305 5th Ave.

c. Highlight property anniversaries (150, 100) on Facebook Historic Sites of Decorah and Winneshiek County. Mark thought if any Decorah significant properties reach a 100th or 150th anniversary, DHPC might highlight them on Facebook.

9. Decorah Demolition permit process. There was nothing to report.

10. DHPC, City Council, Planning and Zoning, Board of Adjustment updates. Judy will monitor these organizations’ work during April. Nan will do so in May, since Mark monitored in both February and March.

11. Contacts

a. Introduction to Planning and Zoning Workshop for Local Officials (presented by Iowa State University Extension, Hotel Winneshiek, April 25, 2024). Mark will attend this.

b. Preserve Iowa Summit, Mount Pleasant IA, June 6-8, 2024. Nan and perhaps Kathy are considering attending and Mark is considering skipping the summit this year.

c. 305 Fifth Ave. Constance Johnson, owner, gave Mark a tour of this Altfillisch home.

12. Commissioner Reports. Mark reported that a committee of the National Conference of State Historic Preservation Officers (NCSHPO) sent out a survey about the Standards of Rehabilitation as they are applied across all National Historic Preservation Act programs. Wording of survey questions suggests the office has received a variety of complaints about the rehabilitation standards. Mark said DHPC has so little experience with the standards that he’s decided not to fill out the survey, but others may do so.

13. Public Comment. There was none.

14. Upcoming meeting: Wednesday, April 24, 2024, 4:30 pm.

15. Adjournment. Meeting was adjourned at 6:03 p.m.

March 27, 2024

TO: Decorah Building Officials Greg Swanson and Travis Goedken
Decorah Historic Preservation Commission <historicpreservation@decorahia.org>
TOPIC: 201 W. Water St. (JNC LLC) C-3 Design Permit Application

FROM:

I. The Property

The 201 W. Water St. property is a large stuccoed building that incorporates three distinct properties:

- the impressive late nineteenth decorated brick building that housed the Ben Bear Clothing store (201 & 203 W. Water St.);
- the neighboring commercial building (205 W. Water St.) that Ben Bear purchased in 1892, evidently for use as storage;
- the original hipped-roof, woodframe 101 Winnebago St. storefront that bordered the alley, but shared a flat transitional roof with 201 W. Water St. This property was eventually incorporated into 201 W. Water St., even as it retained some of its own distinctive detailing. (NRHP nomination, p. 69, and *Picturesque Decorah 1899*)

As the 2017 National Register of Historic Places nomination notes, the building sits at an important corner location at the core of the commercial district. Because of the building's lack of historic integrity, the whole building complex is “non-contributing” in the Decorah Commercial Historic District.

II. The Proposal

JNC LLC proposes a building renovation that includes several elements: ● Configuring the interior space and re-opening the 205 W. Water St. entryway so that the building can house three separate businesses with their own entrances. ● Adding 4” x 1” exterior stucco trim around the second-story window openings. ● Painting the exterior in three distinct colors in order to distinguish the three individual business locations. There are also plans for a single contrasting trim color on the whole property.

- Adding on the Winnebago elevation two new murals and renovating the existing mural—or adding three new murals (the application suggests both options).

III. DHPC Response

Everyone with an interest in historic architecture laments the loss of the decorative brick exterior of the original Ben Bear store and its neighbor to the west. Recovering those facades

would be very ambitious, and expensive. The current owners are, rather, proposing a less ambitious renovation.

Because there were considerable differences in DHPC member reactions at our March 27 meeting, and because our response is advisory only, we decided to vote and indicate preferences on separate aspects of the owner’s proposal rather than taking a single, comprehensive vote.

Decorah Municipal Code 15.04.010.D states that one goal of the code is to “To break up the monotonous appearance of long facades.” And code 14.04.050.D. includes detailed techniques for “articulation of the facade.”

1. DHPC therefore applauds JNC’s plan to re-open the entryway of 205 W. Water and are encouraged by the proposal to “restore the original look to the front of the building” by “installing the door and transom window.” In fact DHPC has encouraged and applauded attempts to recover or re-create transom windows. Given how many transom windows have been lost, we only *wish* that this new entryway would, in the words of the proposal, “replicate the look of *the rest* of the buildings downtown” (italics are ours). We also encourage the owner in a goal, stated in conversation, of someday opening up larger windows with transoms on either side of the proposed entryway.
2. The owner proposes second story window trim “to add depth, to further improve the aesthetic of the building, and to stick to the traditional nordic look.” Code 15.04.010.B “Detailing” says the following: “A high to moderate level of design and architectural detail is preferred. Design should harmonize with the detailing of the surrounding buildings in window shape, cornice lines and brickwork. Building renovations and alterations should restore the architectural details of cornices, brickwork, transom, display windows and bulkheads.” DHPC and the owner both acknowledge that the new stucco window trim is not a “restoration” of the original windows. But the new trim will improve the current blank window openings, and will be a positive move towards increased architectural detailing and “breaking up the monotonous appearance of long facades.” We don’t ourselves see this move as, in the owner’s words, “stick[ing] to the traditional nordic look,” but, rather, as evoking the best of Decorah’s historic downtown architecture.
3. Decorah Code 15.04.010.G “Color” says the following: “Permanent materials like brick, stone, and metal should not be painted and should remain, or be preserved, as close to original or existing finish as possible.” Given that stucco, although relatively permanent, is a surface coating, and that the building is already painted, DHPC does not resist the owner’s proposal to over-paint.

DHPC voted unanimously (6-0) to endorse the above three items (numbers 1-3).

4. The owner proposes exterior painting “to utilize nordic colors to exemplify the nordic values and aesthetic of Decorah.” In a followup conversation, the owner has explained that the order of the three colors is quite intentional: he believes that the red “Tropical Nut” on 205 W. Water will blend with the red brick of 207 W. Water; the ochre “Safari Sun” on the front and side elevations of 201-203 W. Water St. will be the least jarring change from the building’s current tans; and the blue “Aqua Dance” will add a stronger dash of color to a Winnebago St. commercial area that is eager to be noticed.

Decorah Code 15.04.010.G “Color” says the following: “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.” DHPC doubts that there is a “nordic aesthetic” in Decorah generally or in the commercial district specifically. And, as noted, the municipal code emphasizes C-3 colors that achieve “harmony” and that preserve the downtown’s “unique historic quality,” and it is therefore on those (admittedly general) grounds that we respond to the proposed colors.

We note, first of all, that most of downtown Decorah leans towards shades of tan/brown, with a few shots of various greens. (The bright red of the second story of 213 E. Water St., the current deep red color band on 201 W. Water St., and the deep purple entryway of 301 W. Water St. are notable exceptions.)

(A note for anyone considering this application: the photocopied color samples in the application do not accurately convey the proposed colors, swatches for which are available on the internet under the color name and Valspar color number identifiers.)

DHPC could not reach consensus on the proposed colors. Two DHPC members would accept the proposed colors. At least three members said the proposed colors are too different from the rest of the downtown, and that the colors should at least be in much more muted tones. At least two members said that they could accept the proposed colors in much smaller doses—perhaps as accent colors, or when used with other, more moderating body colors like the tans and browns currently on the building. At least two members believe the proposed large stretches of color would work against the municipal code’s emphasis on articulation of the facade; others believe the proposed color differences would help subdivide the building’s current expansiveness.

In conversation, but not on the application, the owner noted that there are plans for a contrasting color on the newly-installed window trim, possibly on the existing continuous band that runs along the bottom of the windows (or, possibly, only on the parts of the band underneath the individual windows), and, possibly on a trim band at the roofline. The owner is considering two color choices: tan or blue.

Most DHPC members believe the additional trim coloring would be an advantage—on the window trim, the continuous band under the windows, and along the roofline. Because of our very different responses to the proposed body colors, and how much those colors should be used, we did not discuss the trim color choice.

5. Finally, the owner’s application at one point proposes two new murals on the building’s Winnebago St. elevation, and at another proposes three new murals. In conversation, the owner suggested that re-installing windows in the two new proposed mural spaces would be a positive choice, and a long-term dream, but that the financial cost makes that impossible in the short term. The owner recognizes that new murals will require a full permit application with a final proposed design, but is at this point looking for a judgment on the proposed locations and sizes. The DHPC response is grounded in the 2021 mural guidelines developed by DHPC and Planning and Zoning based on

Decorah municipal code for C-3 design and signage alterations.

- a. DHPC notes, first of all, that the proposed murals do not obscure architectural detailing (Mural Guideline # 2), and that they are also suitably sized and appropriately framed (Mural Guideline # 3).
- b. A bigger concern is location (Mural Guideline # 1, quoted here):

Murals should not be painted on a building's primary elevation. The primary elevation is the side (or sides) of a building that (1) defines the building's architectural style and massing (shape and size), or (2) forms the business's main or primary entrance, or (3) faces the busiest street. Murals are encouraged to be painted in alleys, or on side-streets.

The Winnebago elevation may be less primary than the Water St. elevation, but it nevertheless fulfills the definition of "primary." And the new color scheme, with a separate business entrance from Winnebago, actually brings new prominence to the Winnebago St. elevation. This would argue against allowing new murals on this elevation. On the other hand, there has for perhaps forty years been a mural in this location that has become an accepted part of the downtown's texture.

The DHPC members voted unanimously (6-0) to encourage the owner to further pursue the restoration of the the historically-themed Carl Homstad mural, noting that the main body of the mural is in quite good shape (despite some fading), and that restoration of the most damaged areas—the dirt street at the bottom of the mural, and the sky—could likely be done by someone other than the original artist.

Many DHPC members believe murals could help de-emphasize the proposed large stretches of single building colors. At least two members would endorse three murals on the Winnebago elevation, but only if the two new murals were muted in color and were coordinated with the colors of the existing Homstad mural. A number of members would support a maximum of two murals on the Winnebago elevation, and only if the style and coloring were complementary.