

Economic Development Committee

I believe it was 5 years ago that I attend my first Landmarks Ordinance Review Committee meeting. The process required to update the Landmarks Ordinance was slow, but it required community input and experience with what works and what doesn't in our city's existing historic resource inventory.

The preservation of Landmarks and buildings in historic districts is very specialized and requires knowledge of history, architecture, building techniques and regulations. The City of Madison is the agency and the Landmarks Commission is the body that works on behalf of the National Park Service and the State Historical Society on preserving our historic resources. The Landmarks Commission and the City Preservation Planner are best equipped to address the interaction of all these factors. I may assume wrongly, but I suspect that the Economic Development Committee is not up to speed with the Department of Interior National Park Service standards of preservation.

Some of you know that my husband and I rehabilitated the old Executive Residence in 2019. Its uses in the last 166 years make it important to the City, the State and the University. However even though it stands on Mansion Hill, it is surrounded by buildings built in the 1950's and 1970's, before we started to think much about historic preservation at a local level. Even though it's a beautiful building inside and out, it has lost a good deal of its context without the contemporaneous buildings on either side. This is why the 200 foot rule is so important to historic preservation. Without the surrounding vernacular buildings, these resources become like artifacts in a museum, rather than parts of a living community. Requiring a review of any proposed development within 200 feet of our shared historic resources is critical.

Promotion of housing is often used against the preservation of our historic resources. For example we have lost a significant part of the late 19th and early 20th century buildings in the Langdon Street Historic district between Frances and Lake in the past few years to more market-rate student housing. Keep in mind that landmarked buildings and historic districts are mostly located on the isthmus where the cost of development is the much larger prohibitive factor. The more efficient generation of new housing units will be in the BRT Transit Overlay Districts, which the City is already working on implementing. The preservation of our historic resources does not prevent the construction of new housing in our city. It prevents it where profit for private individuals, not the City, is the motivating factor.

I ask the Economic Development Committee not to modify the Landmarks Ordinance Review Committee's proposed changes. This is a complicated ordinance for which the details have been considered very carefully by a qualified team and an engaged public.