

## PLANNING DIVISION STAFF REPORT

December 8, 2020



PREPARED FOR THE LANDMARKS ORDINANCE REVIEW COMMITTEE

**Legistar File ID #** [56918](#), Draft Historic Preservation Ordinance, Parking Lot Issues  
Memo #7: Signage; vinyl as prohibited building material; cultural resources

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### Background

Of the remaining "parking lot" items, signage and vinyl as a prohibited building material have been on the list since early in this process. Staff has added cultural resources as many of our districts have some level of archaeology due to the Madison area being a site of long-term human habitation.

### Signage

Currently the historic preservation ordinance specifies that signage needs a Certificate of appropriateness, but also defers to district-specific standards, however there are no signage standards in any of our historic districts.

MGO 41.18(3)

Signs. The commission shall approve a certificate of appropriateness for signs unless it finds that any of the following are true:

- (a) The size or design of the sign(s) would adversely affect the historic fabric of the structure or the district;
- (b) The sign(s) fails to comply with [Chapter 31](#), MGO;
- (c) The sign(s) fails to comply with specific standards and guidelines for signs adopted in each historic district under this ordinance.

It is common practice for historic district design guidelines to have specific requirements about where signage can be located, the types of materials appropriate in the district, and the method of illumination (usually indirect illumination). As Madison has not had standards specific for signage in the historic districts to this point, one path forward could be to recommend that signage comply with the general standards in the historic districts and not provide specific guidance beyond. Staff would recommend slightly more specificity so as to both guide applicants and provide a solid framework for review by the Landmarks Commission and the Preservation Planner, but that sign standards remain in MGO 41.18 rather than the historic district standards, while allowing that a district specific exception may be possible in the future. Such standards could read:

Signs. The commission shall approve a certificate of appropriateness for signs if it finds that the following are true:

- (a) Signs are located within the façade areas set aside for signs as part of the façade design or are integrated and compatible with the structure where the façade areas have not been set aside for signs;
- (b) New signs shall be consistent with the traditional signage pattern locations on a structure or a property, and shall feature materials and style of illumination typical of the period of significance for the property or district;
- (c) Signs shall comply with [Chapter 31](#), MGO;
- (d) Signs shall comply with specific standards and guidelines adopted for historic districts under this ordinance.

### **Vinyl As Prohibited Building Material**

Vinyl as a building material faces a number of challenges in historic districts. While it is initially economical, as a replacement product it cannot be repaired as most traditional building materials can and once the plastic fails, then the product must be replaced. This puts a property in a cycle of regular replacement of plastic components, which is costly in the long term (particularly with windows), making it both an economic and sustainability issue. There are also environmental considerations as vinyl is toxic to produce and off-gassing has health consequences (see attached article from *Architectural Digest*).

But the primary consideration is that vinyl often fails to adequately replicate the historic materials it is replacing. Staff regularly has discussions with property owners who do not believe that their part of a historic district is particularly historic anymore because so many of the buildings now feature vinyl. It does not take an expert to identify that these building materials are plastic rather than wood, metal, or masonry. However, there are starting to be some advancements in products in order to make them better replicate the original building material. Last year the Landmarks Commission reviewed several proposals for replacement porch decking where they reviewed a number of material samples for alternative flooring. The PVC flooring product they approved was nearly indistinguishable from wood and in fact the Wisconsin Historical Society has started to approve this product for preservation tax credit projects.

The key issue before the Landmarks Commission is that when a part of a building cannot be preserved, does the replacement material adequately replicate the historic appearance? The precedent in our historic districts has been that vinyl was an acceptable replacement product, but that has often damaged the historic character and historic integrity of those districts. Our interpretation on an appropriate replacement material has changed, but the current standards and precedent still allows for these products. With the new historic district ordinance, staff would recommend that projects comply with the guidance from the recently adopted State statute and not the previous precedent established by the Madison historic district standards:

***Wisc SS 62.23(7)(em)2m.** In the repair or replacement of a property that is designated as a historic landmark or included within a historic district or neighborhood conservation district under this paragraph, a city shall allow an owner to use materials that are similar in design, color, scale, architectural appearance, and other visual qualities.*

The language of the new historic district standards is in compliance with the State statute and would provide the Preservation Program the latitude to approve vinyl only when it adequately replicates the historic materials.

### **Cultural Resources**

Madison is located within the ancestral homeland of the Ho-Chunk people. Much of the city contains areas of known archaeological sites as identified by the Wisconsin Historical Society. Our preservation ordinance does not contain specific language related to these resources and instead focuses on the built environment of the more recent past. The Landmarks Commission and the Madison Preservation Program is in the early stages of modifying our approach to better speak to the significance of this history and better collaborate with our tribal partners in addressing how development may impact these sites.

It is important to acknowledge that history and provide more specific guidance on how to address cultural resources. As this is an issue that the Landmarks Commission is undertaking, staff does not believe that LORC should undertake standards to address these historic resources. But it is important for the committee to be aware that this process is underway.