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Seizing the Positive: How Waverly, Iowa Turned Disaster into Opportunity

By Karen Shostrom Lehmann

Establishing at least one nationally recognized historic district seemed an unattainable goal for the Waverly Historic Preservation Commission (WHPC) in the years after its 1996 acceptance into Iowa's Certified Local Government Program. A natural disaster in 2008, however, created the "perfect storm" for this town of 10,000 residents to launch what culminated in not just one, but four, districts.

A 500-year flood and the resulting FEMA intervention not only jumpstarted the Waverly Commissioners' desire to gain national historic districts but led to additional unexpected benefits. These included expanding community pride in local preservation efforts, launching a salvage operation, initiating multiple community celebrations, helping the Commission to become more politically integrated into city governance, and improving signage in historic areas. Ten years later, it even resulted in a 2018 national preservation award.

Waverly Commissioners have always been interested in documenting "what we have" to

engage in preservation planning from an informed base. Several failed attempts to secure grants for a survey of historic properties put that goal at a standstill. Iowa's 2008 flood, which was the worst flooding event in the town's recorded history, allowed Waverly to receive flood mitigation funds due to the loss of historic properties. The count: 722 flood-affected properties were evaluated for National Register eligibility as required by FEMA, and from this evaluation process, 108 properties were determined eligible for listing. Eventually, 58 structures were demolished as a form of hazard mitigation. The flood's impact on the historic fabric of the town did not receive the amount of



Credit: John Zeller, Iowa SHPO

Waverly Commissioners Linda Hovden, Karen Lehmann, and Don Meyer accept a 2018 Excellence Award from Patricia Blick, Chair of the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions, and Stephanie Paul, NACP Executive Director.

coverage that news outlets gave to other devastated Iowa cities like Cedar Rapids, yet it was one of the most damaging disasters per capita for preservation in the state.

City officials asked the WHPC for suggestions on how to use the anticipated funds. In 2009, FEMA executed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) among FEMA, the Iowa State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management Division (IHSEMD), the City of Waverly, WHPC, and Preservation Iowa (PI) to resolve adverse effects to historic properties resulting from FEMA-funded demolition of Waverly structures. In a nutshell: this allowed the city to pay two different consultants to survey three parts of town and submit paperwork to Iowa's SHPO and the

National Park Service (NPS) to establish districts in the Southeast, Northwest, and Downtown.

During this lengthy process, the WHPC was proud to spearhead the largest salvage of historic properties that had ever been attempted in Iowa. In partnership with Preservation Iowa, 23 homes were identified as having the best potential for reusable salvaged materials. PI was awarded the assistance of a ten-member Americorps National Civilian Conservation Corps team who did the actual salvage, under the supervision of PI and WHPC members. The Americorps workers were fed and housed at a local church and logged 1,809 human hours on the project. The WHPC then hosted four public sale days for salvaged materials, which included 1,333 floorboards,



Credit: Mary Meyer, WHPC

Two types of signs were purchased by the WHPC: brown ones to mark historic district boundaries and blue ones to label each included block.

135 doors, 123 light fixtures, 80 windows, and cabinetry for several full kitchens. Revenue from the sales was used to reimburse local facility expenses, rent a material warehouse, cover liability insurance, and to support Preservation Iowa's future recovery efforts. Due to buyout regulations, the City of Waverly could not keep any of the \$19,000 grossed by the public sales, but PI donated \$1000 to WHPC to help fund district signage.

For almost a decade, the WHPC assisted with the MOA process and resulting requirements: accepting bids from survey consultants, completing required paperwork, hearing updates on the ongoing survey process, proofreading applications, hosting required public meetings, applying for extensions, naming each district with appropri-

ate historic monikers, and planning activities and publicity to celebrate the completion of each district application and its official acceptance by the NPS. One pleasant surprise was that in addition to the three original federally-funded districts, Waverly was invited to apply for a fourth district using state historic hazard mitigation funds. That extended the time required to complete national district applications by several years, but also added a Southwest district. This area includes one of Waverly's oldest remaining homes, the Ira Sturdevant House.

The WHPC has hosted a public celebration for each of the "official" historic districts. Since the commission's streamlined budget is not conducive to party expenses, planning required locating sponsors, soliciting speakers (the mayor, commissioners, local dignitaries), providing refreshments, organizing district tours, submitting newspaper/radio/online publicity, and encouraging the public and press to attend. Each celebratory program was held at a local mainstay in that district (such as an art deco business, a historic church, and a century-old lumberyard), and was supported by business and individual sponsors located in that quadrant. Waverly's four designated historic districts are the Old Fourth Ward SE Historic District (2013), Harmon & LeValley NW Historic District (2014), Waverly East Bremer Avenue Commercial Historic District (2014), and Sturdevant SW Historic District (2016).

Walking tour brochures have been created to highlight significant architecture in the three residential districts. They are available to print from the Commission's website or can be picked up at the Chamber of Commerce and Waverly Public Library. Commissioner Mary Meyer researched

and designed the brochures, which contain historic introductions to each selected property. Event attendees were encouraged to participate in walking tours, and houses were marked with balloons and signs. Each celebration also included a public program, with invitations mailed to owners of contributing and individually-eligible historic homes in the featured district.

In conjunction with these events, the WHPC has worked to develop partnerships and to update and improve the advocacy and information on its portion of the City's website. The Commission's webpages include links to all site forms, the approved applications, and information about each historic district. They also include walking tour brochures, photographs, plus resources and links

with related content. The Waverly Public Library has partnered with the Commission to maintain an extensive local history collection which includes print versions of each of these items and information about historic neighborhoods, homes, and businesses. The WHPC also collaborates with the Waverly Chamber of Commerce and City officials, especially in discussion on how best to capitalize on preservation initiatives for economic impact and cultural tourism.

Creating signage to identify Waverly's historic areas gradually became a priority. As each district was officially accepted, commissioners designated a portion of their annual budget to purchase two distinct types of signs from Iowa Prison Industries. Brown rectangular signs with a historic house



Credit: Karen Lehmann, WHPC

Displays such as this one, at the Waverly Public Library, commemorate May as Preservation Month. Walking tour brochures, in the acrylic holder, are available for the three residential historic districts, and the notebooks house the site forms for all historic properties surveyed after the 2008 flood. Brochures created by Mary Meyer.



Credit: Bo Studio 121, Waverly, Iowa

The lower portion of this crane view of 2008 Waverly shows the flooded downtown that became the Commercial Historic District (2014). The SW (2016) district is to the left, across the almost submerged bridge. The overwhelmed dam is to the right of the bridge, under the swirling water, and next to it the pointed roof and square building is the Waverly Hydroelectric Powerhouse (2013). Across the bridge to the right is the spire of St. Paul’s Lutheran Church, part of the NW (2014) historic district.

graphic (modeled on NPS signage) include the name of that appropriate district. The second type are long, narrow, bright blue “street corner” top-per signs that say HISTORIC DISTRICT. The brown signs are placed on every road that leads into a district so that incoming traffic will be notified that they are entering a national historic district. The blue signs are attached to every street corner sign within each district. Signage permission has yet to be negotiated for the Commercial Historic District, which is bisected by a state highway, but the other three districts are bountifully labelled. The signs have proven to be attractive and noticeable, and they generate positive public comments.

Another way that the WHPC has addressed signage is by adding bronze plaques at notable historic locations. These are engraved metal signs

with etched photographs and information, which are attached to an important structure or, in one case, to a giant river rock next to Waverly’s main bridge. Examples include the Bremer Avenue bridge (which once boasted an arch across its center touting Waverly as the “Dairy Spot of Iowa”), the Waverly Hydroelectric Powerhouse, “Old Main” on the Wartburg College campus (NR 1978), and the Farmer’s Exchange Building in a local park. Many sites are chosen based on their eligibility for the Waverly Historic Register and others are part of a developing project on “Forgotten Significant Waverly Places.”

The Waverly Historic Register recognizes properties or sites in the community that are significant to Waverly’s past in terms of distinctive history,

people, events, or architecture. A list of award winners is on the Commission's website, as are the winners of the Historic Preservation Award, another way to recognize local properties whose owners show a long-standing commitment to preservation efforts. The public is invited to nominate private or commercial properties that demonstrate building improvements or renovations that are sensitive to the original character and structure of a property more than 50 years old. So far, 19 properties have received the Historic Preservation Award, and oversize posters for each award year are designed for public display at special times such as May's Preservation Month.

A by-product of creating districts was the discovery that some structures, such as the Waverly Hydroelectric Powerhouse and an historic truss bridge known as the "Green Bridge" were also eligible for individual nomination to the National Register. The Powerhouse is the only municipally owned hydroelectric powerhouse still operating in Iowa and it was listed in the National Register in 2013. The Third Street SE (Green) Bridge was added in 2018. Commissioners would also like to complete the symmetry of nominating the final segment of the city around the downtown, the Northeast quadrant, as another historic district.

Waverly Historic Preservation Award Recipients 2005

Ostrander
401 2nd Avenue SW
Waverly, IA 50677



Mark and Karen Lehmann
220 2nd Avenue NW
Waverly, IA 50677



Don and Pearl Spore
502 2nd Street NW
Waverly, IA 50677



Posters highlight properties selected for the Waverly Historic Preservation Award. They are used in public displays at places such as the public library or an annual local festival. Posters created at The Printery, Waverly, Iowa.

Now that city officials understand the process and the expense associated with hiring a consultant to accomplish this, plans are underway to begin preliminary examination of district boundaries in that area. The next step will be to figure out how to pay for the completion of such a project without the bounty of FEMA funding.

One of the Commission's ongoing goals is public education, so it has been gratifying for commissioners to be asked not only to speak to local service groups, but to present at workshops like the Preserve Iowa Summit. For example, at the 2014 Summit, Karen Lehmann described the process of using FEMA reimbursement to fund historic district surveys and nominations; in 2019, Don Meyer joined a panel on "ABCs of Section

106 for CLGs." The WHPC hosted its first official public forum as part of May 2019's Preservation Month, with architect Andrew Bell explaining how to use historic tax credits to finance rehabilitation of historic buildings and residences. Additional Waverly forums are being planned.

Bell's forum was held in conjunction with yet another celebration. The WHPC was honored in July 2018 with an Excellence Award by the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions at their FORUM in Des Moines. The Excellence Award highlights outstanding local commission efforts and achievements, and it placed Waverly, by far the smallest town winning the award that year, on a national stage. Subsequently, the WHPC identified all former commissioners, as well as city and



Celebrants gather at the CUNA Mutual Building in 2014 for the launch party of the Old Fourth Ward SE Historic District.

Credit: Karen Lehmann, WHPC



Credit: Karen Lehmann, WHPC

This montage was used in a presentation to show the many facets of the salvage operation completed in 2010 by AmeriCorps workers, Preservation Iowa, and local commissioners.

council liaisons, and decided to host an open house to thank everyone who has made historic preservation a local priority. That idea morphed into a larger public party during May's Preservation Month, open to everyone, but with invitations delivered to owners of historic homes or businesses. It was sponsored by First National Bank, held at the Waverly Public Library, and kicked off with displays, refreshments, and included invited guest Paula Mohr, from Iowa's SHPO. Waverly's mayor, as is tradition, issued a proclamation celebrating May as Preservation Month.

Commissioners also used this event to launch the sale of 1868 poster maps featuring a Bird's Eye View of Waverly. The original, one of only two known to exist, was discovered at the local law

firm of Engelbrecht and Buchholtz who gave permission for it to be reproduced as a preservation fundraiser. The poster map can be glimpsed behind the invitation to the open house and, for anyone who is interested, order information is on the WHPC website. Although the disastrous circumstances that led to the WHPC's Renaissance are not to be wished on any city, what can be learned from Waverly's experiences is the importance of seizing whatever positive opportunities are available. The Commission's relationship with city officials and council members was not fully developed for the first years the WHPC existed. It became stronger with the collaborative MOA process and the realization that it is critical to loudly and proudly share accomplishments and preservation milestones.



Credit: Karen Lehmann, WHPC

A bronze plaque commemorates Waverly's former reputation as the "Dairy Spot of Iowa" near the Bremer Avenue Bridge that crosses into the Commercial Historic District.

Regular updates to the City Council should be scheduled, and then reported on by the media and televised on the local cable channel. Relationships can be built with people at organizations like SHPO or Preservation Iowa, or with other local stakeholders like the Chamber of Commerce or public library; these can yield surprising rewards. Attractive signage encourages pride in historic places and spaces. Public education about preservation must be ongoing. Open houses and special events will engage citizens and build a community that appreciates historic preservation.

Waverly's HPC has learned that helping people to become informed about historic preservation yields the best payoff if done proactively, rather than reactively. The town is rightly proud to have four national historic districts and a vibrant commission, and that pride continues to focus attention on projects and programs in its historic neighborhoods. And, of course, undergirding every educational and advocacy opportunity should be a chance to celebrate. As Waverly's citizens know, there is nothing like a good party to bring people together for a common cause. ■