



Historic Preservation Specialist Alison Duleavy takes pictures of buildings on Main Street in Denison. Dunleavy and other consultants are conducting a survey of downtown's buildings to see which contribute to the downtown's Historic Register District status. (Chris Jennings/Herald Democrat)

*By Michael Hutchins, Herald Democrat*

Posted Jul 31, 2017 at 12:01 AM

Updated Jul 31, 2017 at 4:13 PM

Consultants with Rosin Preservation met with downtown Denison stakeholders Tuesday to discuss an ongoing survey of the historic buildings of downtown. Through this survey, city officials will look for ways to increase the number of buildings that contribute to downtown's status as a National Register District.

Main Street Director Donna Dow said a survey of the historic district in 2013 found that 39 percent of the district contributes to the historic nature of the district due to alterations and changes that have been made over the years. However, the 2013 survey did not give reasoning behind its opinions of which structures did not contribute to the district.

With this new survey, Dow said, consultants will give a second opinion on which buildings contribute and what property owners can do to bring their properties closer to their historic look.

"So what that consultant did was say 'We don't think this building is contributing,' but they didn't say why it was not contributing to the status," Dow said, adding that she disputes some of the findings in the first survey.

The new survey was made possible through a \$3,000 matching grant from the Texas Certified Local Government program. In total, Dow said, the city will likely contribute about \$5,000 to the project.

Denison's downtown commercial district was first designated as a National Register District in 1988. In order for a building to contribute to this status, it must be at least 50 years old and maintain the integrity it had during the district's "period of significance." For downtown Denison, this period extends from its inception in the late 1800s through 1933.

For downtown Denison, Rosin will be focusing on two criteria that would qualify a building as a potential contributor to the district, Historic Preservation Specialist Alison Dunleavy said following Tuesday's meeting. These criteria include any architecturally significant or notable buildings or structures that were a part of the development of Denison's central commercial district, she said.

Dunleavy said the decision on whether a building contributes to a historic district does not directly relate to the condition of a building. Instead it is based on the historic integrity of a building compared to its original look. As an example, Dunleavy said, a commercial building may change its use over time and still contribute to the district. However, the historic appearance and features of the storefront must still be maintained to keep that integrity, and thus the contributing status.

As an example, Dunleavy showed photos of a storefront that had changed its front facade and featured modern recreations of historic windows. However, the store front retained its integrity by keeping the feel of a storefront through its original windows and frontage.

As a counter example, Dunleavy presented before and after photos of a vintage bus stop that had the entrance bricked in and the front door relocated. This building had poor integrity, she said.

Following the discussion with downtown stakeholders, Dunleavy said she planned to walk through the district and take pictures of all of the buildings. These pictures will be compared to the historic photographs and records to determine if each building contributes. From there, Dunleavy said, she will also give the reasoning for each ruling.

"Today I will be just kinda getting an overall feel for the district and start making official recommendations," she said.

Among the initial recommendations to enhance the district and increase the number of buildings with contributing status were increasing the size of the district and increasing the span of the city's period of significance. Under current guidelines, the period of significance could be extended to as late as 1967. This would make many of the changes to the buildings over the years feature characteristics of eras that would now be contributing.

When asked about her first impressions of Denison, Dunleavy said she saw a wide variety of styles and ages represented in the downtown streetscape with opportunities to represent decades of Denison's history.

"I think there is a good mixture of buildings here," she said. "Some of them retain their original facade, but there are also some from the 1960s that also will help contribute."

When asked if buildings from 1967 would still retain that historic character, Dunleavy said the number of buildings from that era show that there was development in the area.

"If people were renovating in the 1960s, it seems to show the district was still healthy and active," she said.

Following the initial survey, Dunleavy said the consultant team will hold a second meeting in September to discuss the findings and provide education on historic preservation to property owners.

Among the stakeholders in attendance for Tuesday's meeting was former Denison City Council Member Matt Hanley, who owns a building in the 200 block of Main Street. Hanley said he hopes that these surveys and educational sessions will help alleviate some of the issues he is seeing in downtown with property owners who do not know how to maintain their properties. Because of this, some historic buildings are being effectively demolished due to neglect, he said.

"There is a lot of misconceptions about historic preservation and people don't want to deal with it because of X, Y or Z," he said.

Hanley said he would like to see a committee formed to review and possibly revise the city's policy on historic preservation practices.

Meanwhile, property owner Jim Smisek said he attended Tuesday's meeting out of an interest in preserving the past. Smisek said he was unsure if his property, a former hospital in the 600 block of Main Street, was contributing to the district status. Much to his delight, Smisek found that his building does contribute.

"I've always had an interest," he said. "Especially to see an older downtown district maintained and preserved so that my grandkids will have a chance to see it and experience it."