

Times-Standard (Eureka, CA)

June 28, 2010

History not just for Victorians anymore: City of Arcata works on historic survey project

Author: Allison White/The Times-Standard

Section: News

Local

The shape and culture of Arcata is reflected in its architecture and the landscapes throughout the city, and a city project has been working to capture that history.

Suzanne Guerra is heading up Arcata's Historic Survey Project through the Community Development Department. She started the first phase of the project in May and she estimates that it will take up to two years to complete.

"It's part of an overall effort by the city to learn more about its own historical resources," Guerra said.

Such a survey will give property owners and city planners a better idea of what has historic value within the city. The National Register of Historic Places suggests such surveys be completed every 10 years. The last survey done in Arcata was in 1981, and since properties must be at least 50 years old to be considered a historic resource, it has left a 30-year gap in recording and evaluating these resources.

So Guerra is set with the task of filling that gap and will be focusing on properties built from 1935 to 1965.

"All these time periods are reflected in what was built," she said.

The end of World War II impacted Arcata's development with the construction of subdivisions around the city in what are now places like Sunny Brae and Greenwood, she said. That period of construction, often called modern architecture, may not appeal to some the way Victorian homes do, but they are just as significant.

"I really appreciate modern architecture, as well as older architecture," she said.

"Unfortunately, people see their communities as static, but the '50s happened here like everywhere else."

In the 1940s and 1950s, properties were constructed with an emphasis on families and included family rooms, large yards and shopping centers to serve the outlying subdivisions.

The stories behind the properties and how they were used will all be encompassed in the project to determine what should be designated a historical resource.

"A lot of hopes and dreams were embodied in those subdivisions and those homes," she said. "That's what we're trying to collect."

But it is not only homes that are considered in this project. Commercial structures, landscapes such as the plaza, objects and other properties can also hold historical value.

In this first phase of the project, Guerra along with a few researchers are developing the context of the study, which will identify specific themes and periods of history, and also identify areas that especially need review. By the end of the summer, they will start doing field surveys with the help of volunteers to identify and document possible historical properties.

Documentation is key, as this survey might be the only time a building or place is put into record before it is gone, whether it be through demolition or an unintentional fire.

Field surveys are also important because they allow Arcata residents to participate in the process as they are making the city's history.

"Whether you just lived here to go to school or you've lived here all your life, this is your story, too," Guerra said.

Such surveys also encourage preservation -- property owners can be made aware of aspects to their historical property that can be preserved and used, such as a skylight that had been covered up.

"Every historical resource can't be preserved -- that would be impossible," Guerra said. "But it is always possible to document them" and preserve them when possible.

The survey will also help the city as it continues to grow and develop.

Community Development Director Larry Oetker said his department is "extremely anxious" for the project to be completed.

About 60 percent of the city's buildings are more than 50 years old and when property owners want to know if they need a design review permit for construction or remodeling, planners are uncertain what to tell them. Without updated data, planners have no way of knowing if a property should be considered a historical resource.

"The community expects that we have the answers and have a clear process to go through," he said.

The city's database will be much more complete once the survey is finished. Oetker said he was unsure if the city would keep the historic survey cycle going in another 10 years, as he is focusing on getting this one completed as soon as possible.

"I wish the current one was completed about five years ago," Oetker said.

The cost of the project is about \$43,000.

Mayor Alex Stillman said the council approved the project because of the nature of Arcata.

"We have to do this," she said. "Arcata is basically a historic town."

Having an accurate database record of the historic sites in Arcata would help maintain the character of the city and of individual neighborhoods.

Aside from bolstering tourism, owners of property that is designated a historic resource could be proud of their property's significance to the area.

There is nothing in the general plan that mandates the city complete a historic survey every 10 years, but Stillman would like to see those records kept up to date.

"It's amazing all the changes that have happened," Stillman said.

FIND OUT MORE: For information on the Historic Survey Project or to volunteer, go to www.cityofarcata.org/departments/building-planning/historic-preservation/neighborhood-conservation-areas/historic-preservation/neighborhood-conservation-areas or contact 825-2044 or historic@cityofarcata.org.

Allison White can be reached at 441-0506 or awhite@times-standard.com.

Caption:

(c) 2010 Times-Standard. All rights reserved. Reproduced with the permission of Media NewsGroup, Inc. by NewsBank, Inc.

Record Number: 15392709