

A new law to save historic buildings

By KEN McLAUGHLIN

An ordinance aimed at preventing the "needless destruction" of historic buildings will be discussed tonight by the City Council.

The council briefly considered a similar ordinance last year, but indefinitely postponed a decision. Ironically, it was the council's decision in January to tear down the Porter Building that is giving new life to the ordinance. (That decision was subsequently rescinded after historic preservationists and advocates of downtown rejuvenation howled in protest.)

Basically, the ordinance would set up a procedure for reviewing permits for "construction, alteration and demolition" of buildings that have been designated historical or architecturally significant by the City Council. "Historic districts" would also be set up.

Several steps are necessary to develop an "historic" designation.

First, either the City Council or Planning Commission must pass a resolution initiating the proceedings. Also able to start the proceedings would be the owner of "historic" property.

The proposed designation would be referred to an Historical Preservation Advisory Committee (consisting of five citizens appointed by the council) for a recommendation on the suitability of the historic designation.

After receiving the committee's report, the Planning Commission would call a public hearing followed by a recommendation to the City Council, which would also hold a public hearing and accept, reject or modify the recommendation of the commission.

Once a building or district is given the historic designation, the Planning Commission is called on to "review and decide on permit applications for construction, alteration and demolition of structures and . . . sites in historic districts." Appeals of the commission's decisions could be made to the council.

Both the commission and the Planning Department would be able to "carry out, assist and collaborate in studies and programs designed to identify and evaluate structures worthy of preservation."

The purpose of the ordinance, according to the preliminary draft, is to promote stability in neighborhoods,

promote tourism and enhance property values.

"It is further found that the prevention of such needless destruction (of architecturally or historic buildings) . . . is essential to the health, safety and general welfare of the public," the ordinance says.

According to the ordinance, saving historical landmarks will lead to "the enrichment of human life in its educational and cultural dimensions — in order to serve spiritual as well as material needs, by fostering knowledge of the living heritage of the past."

City Attorney Don Haile, who drafted the ordinance, said one of the main purposes is to give the public a chance to comment on looming demolitions. Specific time frames would be set up to "give the public a chance to do something" such as find private investors to renovate a building, he said.

Similar ordinances are already in effect in such cities as Santa Cruz and San Francisco, the city attorney said.

A study session on the ordinance is the last item on tonight's council agenda.

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