

Preserving Forest Grove

Newsletter of the Historic Landmarks Board

OUTREACH: Historic Preservation in La Grande

By
Neil Poulsen

What do the Oregon cities of Ashland, Astoria, Baker City, Jacksonville, La Grande, Oregon City and Pendleton have in common? They all have noteworthy programs in historic preservation.

The Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board (HLB) is beginning to collaborate with these cities to better understand how they benefit from and how they connect with historic preservation. This is the first of an occasional series of articles about what we've learned from these collaborations.

La Grande's Historic Preservation effort revolves around its Downtown District, which was Federally listed in 1999 (La Grande does not have its own historic register; they consider a building historic if it was built prior to 1950). At one time, La Grande was Oregon's fourth largest city. As the hub of eastern Oregon, it was a natural stopping point for people traveling between Portland and Boise, Idaho. But times changed and so did economic conditions; the citizens of La Grande felt the need to revitalize their community and attract businesses downtown. The Downtown Historic

District is the most visible aspect of this effort.

But to attribute the city's revitalization solely to its successful Downtown Historic District would be simplistic. La Grande considers its

Downtown Historic District, its Mainstreet Program, and its Urban Renewal District key components of the same comprehensive plan. This broad-based approach has substantial advantages.

Façade Improvement Program

Consider the Façade Improvement Program. This helps business and

property owners preserve the character of the historic downtown. Similar to Forest Grove's Renovation Grant program, the Façade Improvement Program provides funding to make improvements that are consistent with the architectural heritage of La Grande's historic buildings. Since the Downtown Historic District lies within the (much larger) Urban Renewal District, the Façade Improvement Program can be funded from property taxes collected in the Urban Renewal District. Last year, La Grande budgeted \$50,000 (compared with Forest Grove's \$7,500) for the



*Adams Avenue, La Grande, Oregon c. 1940.
From http://www.soultones.com/pc_lagr.html*

Façade Improvement Program. This funding was quickly spent on a variety of projects.

Many property owners like this program, because some of the taxes they pay can directly benefit their properties. Adoption of historic preservation-related standards (originally called Design Guidelines) was more palatable to property owners because of the funding they could receive through the Façade Improvement Program.

Marketing and Tourism

Another advantage of the City's broad-based approach to funding historic renovation can be seen in their marketing and tourism successes. With its increased tax base and additional investment dollars, La Grande is able to market its downtown as a distinct destination, as opposed to having individual businesses promoting themselves separately: It's a distinction having a business in the Downtown Historic District that can draw customers from local strip malls. The city advertises its Downtown Historic District in signs on nearby I-84; the signs help draw tourists to the area.

Landmarks Commission

La Grande has a Landmarks Commission similar to Forest Grove's HLB. Their primary responsibility is to review any project that requires a permit and which affects the exteriors of historic properties in the Downtown Historic District. The Commission ensures that project objectives are in alignment with City standards.

Painting projects are included in the Commission's mandate. Property owners work in partnership with the Commission to arrive at mutually beneficial solutions. For example, rather than getting caught up in the actual selection of paint colors, owners are referred to palettes of historic colors that many paint stores maintain (there is a requirement that a maximum of three colors be used, though). The common sense bottom line shared by owners and the Commission alike is that buildings must look good after they are painted!

Many property owners like the Façade Improvement Program, because some of the taxes they pay can directly benefit their properties.

For another example of a mutually-beneficial partnership, consider the building owner who was concerned about the prohibitive cost of restoring 30 windows in a multi-story, historic building. The owner did some research and discovered the existence of fiberglass windows that had the appearance of historically accurate

windows. At a fraction of the cost, the decision was reached by the Landmarks Commission and the building owner to use the artificial windows on the building's upper floors, and to use historically-accurate, wooden windows exclusively at the street level. The project was subsequently awarded funding from the Façade Improvement Program.



High School La Grande, Ore. Published by Pacific Photo Co., Salem, C

The La Grande Landmarks Commission also pursues other projects. They conduct historically-related walking tours and help provide plaques and markers that have been silk-screened or laser etched in wood. They also sponsored the development of the historic preservation-related standards (originally called Design Guidelines) that were later adopted by the City.

A Successful Outcome

La Grande's historic preservation program has been a success. It is no wonder that property owners appreciate the benefits of the Downtown Historic District and the

additional funding source represented by the Façade Improvement Program: La Grande's buildings get restored, property values increase and so does the City's tax base. Less tangible, but nonetheless beneficial, La Grande's historic preservation project is a source of civic pride. Historic restoration can also draw tax credits to related projects which in turn bring more investment into the downtown area.

As a final note, La Grande, unlike Forest Grove, has nothing like our Eric Stewart collection of historic documents. They do have a collection of photographs, though, many of which have been published in pamphlets by the Landmarks Commission. Sadly, some of the photos are a source of lament, as they document outstanding historical properties that have since been demolished. It is our fervent hope that with our own Historic Districts, Design Guidelines and—who knows—a well-funded Façade Improvement Program like La Grande's, that similar fates do not await Forest Grove's historic legacies.

La Grande's Early Days

Heavily borrowed from Jim Reavis at <http://www.oregongenealogy.com/union/lagrande.htm>

The distinction between Old Town and New Town La Grande did not come into being until after the arrival of the railroad in 1884. Ben Brown, an early settler, had built his home on the trail taken by many of the emigrant trains moving westward. Mr. Brown's home being a most commodious dwelling, it early on became a natural stopover for the weary emigrant train travelers, mule trains, and heavily laden freight wagons. Mr. Brown, hospitable and ever eager to afford accommodations to visitors, thus established a hostelry.

Mr. Brown became a leading figure in the new community; it became the general practice to refer to the settlement as "Brown's Town" or "Brownsville." However, there was already a Brownsville in Linn County in Western Oregon. When it became necessary

to formally name the town, the Post Office Department decreed that some more distinctive name would have to be selected.

A young Frenchman was living in La Grande at this time and he was extravagant in his praises of the beauty of the Grande Ronde Valley as seen from the heights of Old Town. His use of the French phrase "La Grande" in this connection was familiar to all of the residents. When a meeting was called to discuss a name for the post office it seemed quite proper to use his descriptive and altogether apt phrase as the name for the community. But little can now be learned of this individual other than that his name was Charles Dause.

The business establishments of early La Grande were many and most of them appear to have been rather ephemeral in character. A butcher shop opened in 1862 and a year later the first livery stable was built. Oats at the stable sold for 20 cents a pound and the standard charge for hay for one animal per night was one dollar. One day in 1863 an enterprising gentleman came through La Grande with a wagon load of cats which he was able to sell at extremely high prices. Ben Brown bought one for his children, for nine dollars.

The early settlers of La Grande were apparently concerned about the community's high moral standards. Early court records show that there were many arrests for such Sunday offenses as "Keeping a store open," and

The complaint stated that she was being indicted for keeping a house of ill fame for the purposes of prostitution.

"Keeping a tippling-house open." In 1866 Herman Weyneman was indicted for betting on billiards; he was fined \$50 for

this offence. Two years later a woman of some notoriety around La Grande by the name of Bidly Oats was indicted for keeping a house of ill fame. In order that there be no question about what the State claimed she was guilty of, the complaint was amended by stating that she was being indicted for keeping a house of ill fame for the purposes of prostitution. James H. Slater, later US Senator Slater, was the prosecutor. The jury found her guilty, but the judge was evidently tender-hearted and fined her only \$100 for her derelictions.



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The Forest Grove Historic Landmarks Board Grant Program

Is your house on our local register? If it is, did you know that your house is eligible for restoration / rehabilitation grant funding? The Historic Landmarks Board has funds to help you with your projects. If you are planning any exterior restoration work such as restoring architectural features or if you have structural work to do such a foundation repair, we'd love to help. We fund projects up to 50% of the cost of the job per grant. Come see us! We can also help you find historically appropriate solutions to any problems you may have.

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