



Date: October 17, 2016
To: Mayor and City Council
Through: Kari Kent, Deputy City Manager
From: Christine Zielonka, Development Services Director
John Wesley, Acting Historic Preservation Officer
Subject: Consideration and approval of the Heritage Neighborhood recognition program Citywide

Strategic Initiatives



Purpose

The purpose of this report is to receive City Council approval to begin implementation of a new program that can be used to recognize neighborhoods that have historic value to the City but do not meet the requirements for the historic district zoning designation. The designation that approved neighborhoods will receive under this program is “Heritage Neighborhood.” The Historic Preservation Board has reviewed this program and recommends approval.

Background

Over the years the Historic Preservation Office and the Historic Preservation Board have seen areas of the community that have played an important part in Mesa’s history but have not maintained sufficient integrity to meet requirements for either local or national historic district designation. We have also recognized some areas where there are significant design features and unique forms of development that could warrant establishment of a historic district, but the properties are not old enough to qualify for historic district status. Staff has been considering options for how to provide recognition for these types of neighborhoods. The staff proposal is the creation of a designation called “Heritage Neighborhood.”

Staff has worked with the Historic Preservation Board and citizens to develop this proposed program. A draft of the program was presented to the Community and Cultural Development Committee in August 2014 and they voted unanimously to have staff move forward with further development and presentation to full Council. Staff presented the proposal to the full Council at a study session on August 29, 2016.

Discussion

There are likely many neighborhoods in Mesa that may desire some type of historic recognition, but due to the lack of maintenance of the historic nature of the buildings in the neighborhoods it is difficult to meet the requirements for traditional historic district designation. Two examples of such neighborhoods are Washington Park and Lehi.

The Washington Park neighborhood is located at the northeast corner of Center and University. This area was platted between 1913 and 1920. The subdivisions that make up this area had

small lots to make them more affordable and did not have the same restrictions on race and property usage as other subdivisions. The eastern portion of this area was initially occupied by Mexican-Americans and the western portion by African-Americans. While the area was primarily a residential neighborhood, the lack of use restrictions allowed for the development of stores, churches, barber shops, etc. to serve the needs of the local residents. Booker T. Washington School provided a location for the social, cultural and educational center for this neighborhood and its families. Because of this history, Washington Park neighborhood holds a unique place in the history and development of Mesa.

Over the years this neighborhood has seen many changes. There have been problems with dis-investment, some structures are not well maintained, others have been altered, and some structures have been torn down. Today there are vacant lots scattered through the neighborhood and pockets of newer housing, some of which do not fit the form and style of the homes built during the historic period. These changes make the application of the traditional historic designations difficult.

The Lehi neighborhood is generally located east of Center and north of McKellips to the Consolidated Canal. There is also an area east of Gilbert Road north of the 202 Freeway that is considered to be part of Lehi.

Lehi is the location of the original Mormon settlement in 1877 that resulted in the subsequent development of Mesa. The center of the original development was at what is now the intersection of Horne and Lehi. Historic structures in the area include Lehi School and Lehi store. The area developed as a rural, agricultural settlement.

Residents and property owners in the area continue to maintain a rural lifestyle. The area is developed with narrower roads and there are still many open irrigation ditches along the streets. Most of the area includes large lots and many properties have a variety of livestock. The overall development integrity, however, has been altered over the years with newer homes being built and lot sizes reduced. The residents of this area have considered applying for either the national or local district designation but there is question whether there is sufficient integrity and there is concern for the requirements of the local designation.

The current method of recognizing historic properties and placing them on the City's Historic Property Register is to rezone the property into a historic district. The purpose and goal of the historic district designation is to maintain the historic appearance of the buildings within the district. As a zoning designation, the rules of the district have the force of law and very strict requirements are used to evaluate proposed modifications to buildings. With each district we look at the nature, style, and quality of the existing homes from the historic era to help evaluate any proposed modifications in keeping with the Secretary of the Interior standards for modification of historic properties.

While the zoning process is a good tool and has worked well in Mesa and many other communities, it does not necessarily work well in all cases. In the two examples stated above, the individual buildings in the area that should be recognized and preserved have not been maintained to the level that creates a viable, traditional district. There are other features that still convey the historic nature of the area (street pattern, lot sizes, landscaping, size and orientation of buildings), but the zoning process does not recognize them well or do much to preserve them.

Given the desire to provide some level of recognition and possible protection for areas such as this, staff and the Historic Preservation Board have developed a suggestion to create a new option we are calling a "Heritage Neighborhood" recognition program. The use and application of this program would focus less on maintaining specific structures or details of structures but instead focus on basic neighborhood development patterns and the social and cultural history of the area.

Attachment "A" gives details of the proposed program. A few key summary points are:

- Neighborhoods residents, property owners, and business owners would work together, with support from staff as needed, to establish neighborhood boundaries and the history of the area.
- Applications would be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Board for recommendation to the Council.
- Establishment of a heritage neighborhood would be by resolution. Approval would establish some design characteristics that should be followed and provide for street signage to designate the neighborhood.
- We would create a Heritage Neighborhood Register webpage, similar to the Mesa Historic Property Register, and make the information about these neighborhoods available to the community.

The keys to implementation will be the establishment of general characteristics of the neighborhood to preserve into the future and the provision of the street signage to designate the area. The proposal as drafted provides for a basic level of street signage consistent with what is provided for historic districts.

Implementation of the program will have some budget impact, primarily on staff time to assist in the processing of requests for designation and for the street signage in the neighborhoods. In review with the Neighborhood Outreach, we think there may be around 15 neighborhood areas that would meet the criteria and could be considered for this designation (there are currently seven historic districts in Mesa). The work to assist with processing the applications will be absorbed by current staff, which may slow down the processing. The Transportation Department currently absorbs the cost of street signage for historic districts, they will continue to do so with Heritage Neighborhoods.

Concurrence

The development of this proposed program has been done with the support and help of the Neighborhood Outreach Office. Staff has also reached out to several neighborhoods and the Mesa Grande Community Alliance for their comments. All have been supportive and look forward to adoption of the program.

The draft program has been reviewed by the Council Community and Cultural Development Committee and they supported moving forward with this program. The Historic Preservation Board reviewed this program at two meetings and voted to recommend approval at their September 2014 meeting.