

PRESERVING DULUTH'S ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE CAN ENRICH ITS FUTURE

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Historic preservation isn't about saving stodgy old buildings. Historic preservation is about using the best of our shared past to enhance our future. Old buildings are the physical manifestation of who we are as a community and what makes each community unique.

The Preservation Development Initiative, supported by the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, seeks to capture that spirit in a community and economic development strategy that works to save the best of the past while creating investment opportunities for the future.

Duluth was selected by the Trust as a PDI demonstration site and in November a team of experts assessed the community's historic preservation opportunities. Fortunately, the "build it new" economic development strategy of the past few decades has given way under the burden of expensive infrastructure cost and a deteriorating sense of community. We are moving past bland industrial parks and low-density subdivisions toward a renewed appreciation for mixed-use development and downtown revitalization. In short, we are rediscovering the elements that made cities so attractive 100 years ago.

With the PDI, Duluth is riding the front edge of this exciting new trend, but there is more work to be done educating the citizens of Duluth on the benefits of historic preservation and creating a strong preservation ethic.

Jane Jacobs, the author of the hugely influential book, "The Death and Life of Great American Cities," once said, "New ideas require old buildings." Duluth is rich in architectural treasures and these old buildings represent the best ticket to the new "information" economy. Corporations are looking to locate in areas that offer strong quality of life amenities that can be used to recruit and retain a talented work force. Historic preservation is part of the quality of life equation, but much work needs to be done in Duluth.

First, preservation should be viewed as a viable tool within a broad economic development strategy. Duluth has a number of planning tools at its disposal that can be used to rehab old buildings, particularly in the downtown, including an ordinance that established the Heritage Preservation Commission and provides for "the preservation of significant historic properties."

Unfortunately, the commission has been underfunded and lacks a good working relationship with city departments. The city also has a strategic plan for the old downtown area, two National Register districts and a number of individual buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places, though the city has yet to take full advantage of the designations. As Duluth's citizens and leaders learn of the tremendous benefits of historic preservation, the commission should serve as the public sector agency that coordinates historic preservation initiatives.

Second, a good preservation strategy requires leadership from all three -- public, private and nonprofit -- sectors. Duluth can seize this opportunity, with support from the Duluth Area Chamber of Commerce, Greater Downtown Council, Duluth Convention and Visitors Bureau, Duluth Local Initiatives Support Corp. and Duluth Preservation Alliance.

Most preservation incentives require private sector participation and can take advantage of nonprofit partnerships. Tools such as the Historic Preservation Tax Credits offer financial incentives to for-profit investors that incorporate preservation of historically significant structures and these incentives can be effectively blended with New Markets Tax Credits to lure additional private capital to these developments.

Third, the policies and incentives should be focused on strengthening and building the downtown district and the neighborhoods that surround it. The post-suburban community is moving back to the future. It is centered on downtowns and traditional neighborhoods, where residents can live, work and play within walking distance of each activity. Duluth is well-positioned in this regard, as the city is the center of commercial activity for the region and much of the commercial activity occurs in and around the downtown. The city also has a strong collection of dense historic buildings in the downtown that could serve to create that 24/7 vibrancy and vitality.

As I have worked in numerous communities around the country and witnessed historic preservation in action, it is clear to me that historic preservation provides numerous economic and community benefits. As I have worked in Duluth for nearly four years, it is also clear that Duluth is uniquely poised to leverage its rich architectural heritage and capitalize on its historic resources to not only benefit the community, but strengthen its economy.

Mac Nichols, PDI director from the Trust, will unveil the final report later this week and I hope that Duluth can grasp the opportunity before it -- using its past to ensure its future.

JAY C. JUERGENSEN is a national expert in community and economic development who has been working with several community development corporations through the Local Initiatives Support Corp. Duluth office. He was part of the PDI Team in November and will address the Duluth Chamber of Commerce Let's Do Lunch series on June 8 at the Kitchi Gammi Club. For information about the Chamber event, call 722-5501.