



## MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** August 23, 2023

**TO:** Deschutes County Board of Commissioners

**FROM:** Tanya Saltzman, AICP, Senior Planner

**RE:** Historic Landmarks Commission Update

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Staff seeks Board of County Commissioners (Board) direction on potential options for the Deschutes County Historic Landmarks Commission (HLC), which has been experiencing a slowdown in activity and currently lacks a quorum. Staff introduced this topic briefly to the Board during Other Items on August 16, 2023.

### I. HLC OVERVIEW

Since 2011, the HLC has served as an advisory body for issues concerning historic and cultural resources for unincorporated Deschutes County and the City of Sisters and reviews development applications for alterations to designated historic sites and structures. The cities of Redmond and Bend have independent historic preservation review bodies. The Deschutes County Comprehensive Plan Section 2.11 Cultural and Historic Resources and Deschutes County Code (DCC) Chapter 2.28, Historic Preservation and Historic Landmarks Commission, establish the legal basis for the HLC.

Deschutes County, together with Sisters, is a Certified Local Government (CLG). The Certified Local Government program is designed to promote historic preservation at the local level. It is a federal program (National Park Service) that is administered by the Oregon State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). Local governments must meet certain qualifications to become "certified" and thereby qualify to receive federal grants through SHPO and additional technical assistance. These requirements include:

- Establish a historic preservation commission;
- Pass a preservation ordinance that outlines how the local government will address historic preservation issues;
- Agree to participate in updating and expanding the state's historic building inventory program;

- Agree to review and comment on any National Register of Historic Places nominations of properties within the local government boundaries.

CLGs are eligible for non-competitive grants that fund work that supports the promotion of historic preservation including surveys, nominations to the National Register of Historic Places, public education, training, etc. The grants, which require a 50/50 in-kind match, have typically been in the \$5,000-\$15,000 range in recent years. Deschutes County has applied for and received CLG grants since 2009. Most recently, Deschutes County HLC applied and was approved for a smaller grant amount (\$5,500) owing to capacity issues and lack of projects that fit the grant funding parameters.

## **II. MEMBERSHIP AND RECRUITMENT**

Until recently, the HLC had five voting members and one ex-officio member. In spring of 2023, two committee members—including the then-Chair—resigned and another, longtime Commissioner Sharon Leighty, passed away. Staff initiated recruitments for all three positions to coincide with May Preservation Month. Low interest caused staff to extend the recruitment one month until the end of June, and then again until August 15. Recruitments were posted on the HLC website and social media, the CDD e-newsletter, and promoted via staff’s professional networks. Ultimately only two applications were submitted for the three open positions.

## **III. LOOKING AHEAD**

It has become increasingly apparent that there is not currently robust interest in the HLC. This is not for a lack of residents’ appreciation of the rich history of Deschutes County; however, the structure and role of the HLC does have some inherent limitations. County historic sites are generally spread out, often more difficult to access, and lack the “critical mass” of historic sites that cities can offer, an example being a downtown historic district. Most historic sites are private property and require owner consent to either nominate, rehabilitate, or provide access. As such, Deschutes County has not reviewed a property for the nomination of a local historic resource in several decades.<sup>1</sup>

Recently, the HLC has focused on being a “connector,” directing people to sources of potential grant funds, education, processes, or local resources, since the HLC lacks the ability to directly participate in (or fund) physical rehabilitation. CLG grant funds have recently been used either directly by the City of Sisters (last year’s primary project was to update its StoryMap of historic resources, for instance) or for staff time in developing guiding documents such as the Strategic Plan and the Policies and Procedures Manual. Participation in May Preservation Month has been limited for various reasons, with the brunt of the planning being undertaken by local groups such as the Deschutes County Historical Society and Three Sisters Historical Society & Museum, both of which have reputations for lively and informative events, workshops, and tours.

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<sup>1</sup> Since 2011, there have been three successful nominations to the National Register of Historic Places: Deedon Homestead, Pilot Butte Canal Historic District, and Central Oregon Canal Historic District.

#### **IV. BOARD CONSIDERATION**

Given this trajectory and the constraints noted above, staff offers the following path for Board consideration:

- Disband the Historic Landmarks Commission as it currently exists.
- Amend DCC Chapter 2.28 to delegate review of alterations to historic resources or nominations of local significance to the Planning Division. This would be achieved through a legislative process with a Planning Commission work session followed by a hearing before the Board. Review of alterations of historic sites or structures would be processed as a land use decision; local nominations of historic sites would be processed legislatively, starting with the Planning Commission.
- DCC Chapter 2.28 would retain its references to the HLC with an amendment acknowledging that if the HLC is not appointed, review authority rests with the Planning Division.
- Deschutes County/Sisters would no longer be a CLG and therefore would not be eligible for CLG funding. For this grant cycle, no funding has yet been spent and staff would coordinate with SHPO to ensure compliance.
- Staff will communicate with the City of Sisters CDD; going forward, Sisters would need to address their own responsibilities as it pertains to their historic structures.
- In the future, if the community galvanizes and expresses support for appointing an HLC, staff can coordinate with the Board during CDD's annual workplan to discuss the opportunity.

Staff recognizes the knowledge and commitment of its past and current Historic Landmarks Commissioners, and greatly appreciates the expertise those individuals have chosen to bring to the Deschutes County community.