



HISTORICAL COMMISSION AGENDA REPORT

Meeting Date: November 19, 2024

Subject: A request for the City Council to authorize the City Manager to execute a Historic Preservation Agreement for a property at 236 Eleanor Avenue

Prepared by: Sean Gallegos, Senior Planner

Initiated by: Walter Chapman, Applicant

Attachments:

1. Draft Resolution
2. Primary Historic Record
3. Historic Preservation Agreement with Ten Year Rehabilitation/ Maintenance Work Plan

Recommendation

Recommend the City Council authorize the City Manager to execute a Historic Preservation Agreement (HPA24-0001) per the recommended findings contained in the attached resolution; and find the project is categorically exempt from environmental review pursuant to Section 15331 (Historical Resource Restoration/Rehabilitation) of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines– Attachment 1 to the report.

Background

Property Description

The 1914 C.W. Morris House, located at 236 Eleanor Avenue, was designated a Historic Resource in the Los Altos Historic Resource Inventory by the Historical Commission on September 28, 1997. As detailed in the City’s Primary Historic Record (Department of Parks and Recreation Forms 523A and 523B) (Attachment 2), prepared by Circa: Historic Property Development, it is one of the few remaining farmhouses in the city.

This two-story, wood-frame Craftsman-style residence features a square plan and a side-gabled roof with decorative wood knee brackets and exposed rafter tails. The ground-floor entry porch includes a prominent front-facing gable with a balcony supported by paired, square wood porch posts. While the balcony has been remodeled since 1997, it retains its original design elements. Other paired porch posts, connected by simple wood railings, frame the ends of the full-width

porch. The entrance is offset to the right, with two large plate-glass windows to the left, and the house retains its original wood sash windows with smaller upper panes. A circular driveway surrounds a mature palm tree in the front yard.

Originally part of the 1911 Adams Subdivision and associated with agriculture, particularly orchards, the bungalow was owned by the Morris family, who held 14 acres of orchards. C.W. Morris, listed as an orchardist in city directories starting in 1922, was likely the property's owner, though it is unclear if the family was the original occupant of the house. Today, the house is one of the few remaining farmhouses in the City.

Although the house has undergone several alterations, it still retains key elements of its Craftsman design, materials, and workmanship, making it a significant example of the style. While the loss of surrounding acreage and its location on a back flag lot—set away from the street—diminishes its historical association as a farmhouse, the property's design integrity remains intact. Thus, it continues to be considered a historic resource.

Historical Commission - 2023

On April 24, 2023, the Historical Commission recommended approval of an advisory review permit for a project involving the addition of a 1,647-square-foot first story, a 327-square-foot second story, and an 832-square-foot basement to the existing two-story historic residence. The project also includes a new 588-square-foot detached garage. According to the report by historical professional Bonnie Bamburg of Urban Programmers, the proposed demolition, additions, and exterior alterations do not compromise the property's physical integrity or historic significance and are consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Structures.

Planning Commission - 2023

The Planning Commission subsequently approved the Design Review, Variance, and Historic Advisory Review on July 6, 2023, to allow these additions. The Variance is requested to allow a basement 2.5 feet above grade that exceeds the maximum height limit of two feet, a 326 square-foot second-story addition on a flag lot which allows only one-story structures, a height of 26.2 feet that surpasses the maximum limit of 20 feet for flag lots, and the placement of an accessory structure in the required front yard, where such structures are not permitted.

Historical Commission – 2024

On November 19, 2024, the Historical Commission will consider a Historic Advisory Review permit for proposed exterior alterations to the property. The alterations include the removal of a 48-square-foot second-floor porch, redesign and material changes to a 297-square-foot covered terrace, modification of a window on the north elevation, and the addition of a new window on the west side. Historical professional Stacey De Shazo of Evans & De Shazo Archaeology and Historic Preservation has determined that these changes will not adversely affect the property's physical integrity or historic significance and are consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Structures.

Analysis

Historic Preservation Agreement

The City of Los Altos currently administers 16 Historic Preservation agreements for historic properties. The Mills Act offers property tax relief to owners of eligible historic properties through a current use assessment, commonly known as a contract assessment. To participate in the program, property owners must enter into a preservation agreement, which grants them a reduced property tax rate as determined by the County Assessor. In exchange, owners agree to preserve, and in some cases, restore or rehabilitate the historic structure on the property. The property tax reduction is based on the appraised market value of the land and any improvements associated with the historic structure, including the rental value of the property.

These agreements are governed by Municipal Code Chapter 12.44.170, which authorizes the City Council to approve Historic Preservation agreements as an incentive for the preservation of historic properties. Typically, Historic Preservation agreements have a duration of ten years, with an automatic renewal clause on an annual basis. Both the property owner and the City have the option to revoke the agreement at any time. A key provision of the agreement requires that any savings from reduced property taxes be reinvested into the preservation, restoration, or enhancement of the historic structure. As part of this commitment, a schedule of proposed improvements to the structure and the property is included in the draft agreement, as outlined in Attachment 3, Exhibit B.

The Historic Property Record, detailed in Attachment 2, confirms the property's designation as a historic resource in the City's Historic Resource Inventory. These forms establish the house's architectural and historical significance under both state and local preservation criteria, emphasizing its distinctive Craftsman-style architecture and its role in the broader context of the city's development.

Given its ongoing recognition as a significant historic resource, the property is eligible for inclusion in the Historic Preservation program. Consequently, it continues to hold its status as a significant historic resource and is deemed appropriate for consideration for a Historic Preservation contract, reaffirming the commitment to its preservation and enhancement.

Environmental Review

The project is categorically exempt from environmental review under Section 15331 ("Historical Resource Restoration/Rehabilitation") of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) Guidelines in that the project is consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, or Reconstructing Historic Buildings.

Public Notification

A public meeting notice was posted on the property, mailed to property owners within a 300' radius, and published in the newspaper. The applicant also posted a public notice sign on the subject property in conformance with the Planning Division posting requirements.

Staff received no comments from the public as of the writing of this report.