

CHAPTER FOUR

Historic Areas: Appearance & Identity

VISION

The Village of Franklin offers a peaceful, historic atmosphere to its residents and visitors. The Village Center, in particular, has an attractive, unified look and feel that pays respect to the Village's history, with architecture and landscaping maintaining the 19th century, human-scaled quality of the Village. Efforts to preserve Franklin's historic flavor, without being contrived, have contributed to the Village's unique character.

FRANKLIN'S BUILT HERITAGE

The Village of Franklin has retained a number of buildings used as homes and businesses by the early settlers of the area. Many of the buildings in the Village Center date back to Franklin's early period of growth, as discussed in Chapter Two, Inventory & Analysis. A number of outlying historic home sites are scattered throughout the Village, though perhaps the most well-known of Franklin's historic buildings, the Cider Mill, is located outside of the Village proper, on the north side of Fourteen Mile Road.

As the Village has grown through the twentieth century, this historic built landscape has faced continued incremental change. Not only have historic buildings been demolished for contemporary construction or lost to neglect, but modern, incongruous renovations chip away at historic value. Historic landscapes have also been lost to road construction, parking, modern landscaping tastes, and utility work.

Recognizing the losses taking place, Village residents acted to preserve some of Franklin's remaining historic landscape several decades ago. In 1969, the Village Center and several other significant buildings, including the Cider Mill to the north, were placed on the newly created National Register of Historic Places, providing access to tax benefits and federal grant money to owners of historic buildings.

In 1971, the Village Center area additionally became the first local Historic Districts registered

in the State of Michigan. This designation allowed for the local Historic District Commission to review any modifications to buildings that would change the external appearance, allowing a method of preventing the demolition or out-of-character alteration of important historic structures.

By taking advantage of these tools as they became available, the Village of Franklin has managed to preserve a number of its early buildings. These protected buildings include both commercial and residential properties, as well as sites such as the Village Green and Cemetery.

Historic District Design Guidelines

One of the most significant recommendations of the 1997 Master Plan Update with regards to Franklin's character was to "prepare detailed, illustrated design guidelines for business and residential properties within the Village Center," in order to provide owners with clear and specific information on historic preservation and renovations within the Village. In early 2006, the

Village Historic District Commission (HDC) created a 40-page manual, *Village of Franklin Historic District Design Guidelines*, which seeks to fulfill this purpose.

That document details the history of the Historic District and the role of the Commission, and provides concrete guidelines for various types of repairs, allowing property owners to be more prepared for the process of work within the

Historic District. Other recommendations from the 1997 Plan have yet to be implemented, such as putting utility lines underground in the Village Center and revising the sign ordinance to establish historic guidelines for public and private signage in the District.

Franklin's Historic Character

Effective preservation of Franklin's character requires a definition of the elements that combine to create it and an identification of the modern influences and changes that have affected it. These elements include the architecture of individual buildings, the size and position of buildings on their lots and their relationships to other buildings, the landscaping around structures, the character of the streets, and the signs, outbuildings, and other visual elements of the



Village. These elements also include the types of facilities, both public and private, located within the Historic District. Modern influences on Franklin's character have typically manifested themselves as changes in the appearance of these elements, such as the use of more modern architectural styles, building materials, and signage. Some of these changes are the result of voluntary action by the Village and land owners, in other cases, they are the result of governmental regulation of roadways and buildings.

The architecture of individual buildings is the best defined of these elements and is protected in the Village Center area, by the Historic District Commission's review process. Franklin's historic buildings belong to various architectural styles

popular between the initial settlement in the 1820s and the early 20th century. The *Design Guidelines* document presents characteristic features of these styles, listing Greek Revival, Queen Anne, Vernacular, American Foursquare, Colonial Revival, and Craftsman as dominant styles at various times.



Of significance to the historic character of Franklin is the existence of a village center area that includes a complete set of municipal and community facilities intermingled with a variety of businesses and residences. Collectively, these governmental, community, commercial, and residential components help maintain Franklin's identity as an independent and autonomous 19th century village. Existing community facilities include village administrative offices, a police station, fire department, post office, library, park, community church, cemetery, and a now private school. Businesses include a small grocery store, bank, dry cleaner, tailor, dentist, photographer, restaurant, as well as others directed to supplying residents with certain specific goods and services. Franklin's downtown also includes some businesses that cater to more modern needs and desires such as an automobile gas and service station, real estate agency, health spa, interior designer, and architect and lawyer offices.

In addition to the use and architecture of the buildings themselves, there is a historic aspect to site design. Within the Village Center, businesses are characterized by being mostly stand-alone structures, set back varying distances from the road, but are close together, permitting residents

and visitors to walk from one to the next. Parking, a necessary part of today's lifestyle, has been mostly located behind or to the side of buildings, maintaining the more human-scaled and human-focused historic street function.

Within the Franklin's Historic District residential neighborhoods, there exist 19th century residences of various styles as noted above. Outside of the downtown area, there are scattered 19th century farm buildings that provide a reminder of the rural character that Village residents have repeatedly identified as a valued trait in past Master Plan updates. While these historic farms have since been platted and largely developed, a number of landscape features maintain the historic feel throughout the whole of the Village:

- Natural features, such as wetlands, woodlands, ravines, streams, and wildlife.
- Mature trees and shrubs lining streets and found throughout lots.
- The presence of horses, and of small horse barns and paddocks.



- Large, extensively landscaped lots around homes.
- Abundant natural open spaces.
- "Soft" boundaries between lawns and natural spaces, created by un-manicured shrubs and other vegetation.

Some of these neighborhood lot features have been preserved by deed restrictions that regulate accessory buildings, tree removal, fences, building materials, and setbacks beyond the requirements of the Zoning Ordinance. The Village Character

Master Plan Update report prepared in 1997 undertook a review of existing deed restrictions, some of which date to the 1930s, and presented an extensive summary of existing restrictions and issues in that report.

Among the concerns was that the deed restrictions typically did not include maximum standards. Minimum home sizes are mandated in several neighborhoods, for example, but Franklin now more commonly faces home construction or renovations that are too large for the lot rather than too small. The report also suggested that updated or new deed restrictions be discussed with neighborhoods to set aside natural open space on lots, restrict lot splits, or prevent new homes from being constructed on existing double lots. This discussion took place at a community-wide Deed Restrictions Seminar held on November 29, 2005.

Included in the rural feel of the neighborhoods is the absence of sidewalks, which the Village Charter forbids in residential areas. As discussed in Chapter Nine, Traffic & Circulation, internal neighborhood streets have low enough traffic levels to allow pedestrians and bicyclists to safely share the road with automobiles, but are interested in side paths that would allow pedestrians to walk or bicycle safely next to major streets and that would have a more naturalized, rural design than standard concrete sidewalks.

THREATS TO HISTORIC CHARACTER

The balance of current tastes and trends with the preservation of valuable heritage is an ongoing effort, and the creation of historic districts was only one piece of that balancing. A number of issues and concerns currently affect the Village's historic character.

Architectural Style

Within the Historic District, review of changes to building exteriors provides for the preservation of this architectural heritage, protecting many of the most significant historic structures. The review process for buildings outside of the District is not as thorough, relying primarily on a single design compatibility requirement that allows the Building

Official to compare the design and position of exterior features of dwellings within 1,000 feet of a proposed home, so as to promote compatibility and harmony. This compatibility requirement involves a good measure of subjectivity and has been infrequently enforced. In reality, new construction in many of the Village's neighborhoods does not have to respect an established Village architectural character, and there is little incentive for renovations to existing structures to be made in a compatible style.

The *Design Guidelines* and Historic District Commission members may serve as a useful resource for property owners outside of the District who wish to build or renovate structures in a historic character, but this is a voluntary and informal process. Of particular concern is the replacement of older homes with new structures that are out of scale with the lot and with other homes in the neighborhood. Minimum home sizes, in square feet of floor area, width of front face, and cubic feet of volume, are required in the Zoning Ordinance; considering revisions to these limits, or adding maximum limits, may be ways to address this concern.

Adding more form-based elements to the zoning code might be another. This style of zoning concerns itself primarily with the physical characteristics of a building – its shape, orientation, and relation to its neighbors – rather than with the use of the building, and has gained popularity as a tool in traditional neighborhood development. Since physical form is the most important aspect of historic preservation, a form-based zoning for the Village Center could be appropriate.

Site Design Characteristics

Some of the non-architectural aspects of historic character can be guided through zoning and the site plan review process for new development. While the Village does not expect much growth, developers have periodically expressed interest in new residential or commercial development, particularly around the edges of the Village. Franklin has repeatedly stressed the desire for a distinct edge separating the character of the Village from the more modern, suburban character of adjacent communities.



New development around the perimeter of the Village could blur this edge, and the Zoning Ordinance should be used to ensure that the appropriate character is maintained. As most of the perimeter is currently zoned for residential use, any commercial development would require both a rezoning and a site plan review, providing two opportunities to ensure that it contributes to the desired character.

Some of the site plan issues that can be addressed through Zoning are active concerns even in the Village Center, where building placement and parking locations are not as pressing as in new development.

Uncharacteristic signage is an active concern of some residents, with some businesses in the Village displaying neon or otherwise jarring signs. Signs are necessary for businesses to communicate with potential customers, but the design of a sign can be tailored to the environment. Considering the low speed of traffic through the Village Center, a business there would not need the same large, attention grabbing sign that a business set back from the road in a suburban strip mall would.

Screening and landscaping in the Village Center are also concerns. Parking, dumpsters, electrical transformers, and other exterior utilities are part of modern business functioning, but in some places, these modern site elements clash with and detract from the overall feel. Properly screening these features from the street and from nearby residential or recreational areas could improve commercial buildings' contribution to Franklin's historic appearance.

Landscaping

Landscaping is a concern throughout Franklin. As mentioned above, both natural and landscaped features throughout Franklin are an essential part of the Village's character. Without maintenance, however, these features can be eroded.

In some neighborhoods, cutting of mature trees, fence styles, and other landscape characteristics are limited by deed restriction and by Village ordinances, but landscaping may still diverge from the desired feel. Utility and road maintenance often takes a toll on mature roadside trees, and invasive species can directly attack native plant life, as the emerald ash borer is currently decimating mature ash populations, or slowly out compete and replace native plants, as in the case of Common Buckthorn. These types of threats mean that maintaining a traditionally Michigan natural environment will require more active planning and management than is provided by standard controls on tree cutting and fencing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of potential ordinance changes, programs, and other actions could help protect and reinforce the Village of Franklin's historic character. Several of these options are detailed below.

Review and revise zoning ordinance

As the Zoning Ordinance is the most basic control on development in the Village of Franklin, it should be reviewed to ensure that it encourages the type of development that Franklin wants. Several pieces of the Ordinance should be examined for consistency with the Village's goals.

- Off-street parking and loading requirements should be reviewed for issues such as the location of parking on a site and the quantity of parking mandated – requiring too much parking can affect the character of the site; requiring too little allows overflow.
- Residential design standards should be reviewed to determine how they have taken form when applied, and what changes might address concerns about “out of scale” construction.

- Area, height, bulk, and setback requirements for commercial development should be reviewed against existing structures, to encourage compatible development.
- Screening requirements should be reviewed to minimize the visual impact of rubbish containers, external utility enclosures, and parking areas for commercial uses.
- Signage requirements should be reviewed to allow sufficient yet more historically accurate signage for businesses.

Since the Zoning Ordinance is the primary regulation affecting development, a review should be given priority.

Create landscape master plan

Since so much of Franklin's character is in its natural features and landscaping, a Landscape Master Plan could help in identifying related priorities within the Village. Such a plan could provide for maintenance of public areas, guide new development to be compatible with the Village's character, and serve as a resource for individual homeowners and business owners seeking to landscape their own properties. Areas of emphasis could include:

- Define a unifying landscaping character for the Village Center, including consideration of trees native to the area, canopy trees, seasonal flowers, and screening of parking areas.
- Use landscaping to define the entryways to Franklin along major roads, particularly for the entry points to the Village Center along Franklin Road.
- Rehabilitate the river valley with native plants.
- Provide information for residents seeking to maintain wood lots and open spaces in good condition.

While the clearest relation of a Landscape Master Plan to the historic character of Franklin would be in its recommendations for the Village Center, maintaining a distinctly Michigan character throughout the Village, in both natural open spaces and manicured landscaping, would contribute to Franklin's overall visual distinction from surrounding communities.

Explore historic overlay zoning for village center

In the process of reviewing the Zoning Ordinance, the Village may decide that heightened standards on signage, screening, etc., that are appropriate within the Historic District might not be appropriate throughout the Village. An overlay district could be added to the Zoning Ordinance in this case. An overlay district, which would be added to the existing zoning on Historic District properties, would provide these standards within the Village Center.

An overlay district is a mapped zoning district that imposes a set of requirements in addition to those of the underlying zoning district. In an area where an overlay zone is established, the property is placed simultaneously in two zones, and the property may be developed only under the applicable conditions and requirements of both zones. In this case, it is the intent that the overlay zone impose standards relating to the historic design, development, renovation and character of buildings on the property.

In addition to more rigorous standards, an overlay district could provide benefits to property owners within the district. As an example, some overlays oriented at historic preservation allow for the repair or rebuilding of a non-conforming structure, if that structure was historically significant and the reconstruction is done in a faithful historic character. Such provisions typically include additional Planning Commission review standards on this type of restoration, similar to the review standards placed on a Special Approval Use.

Consider additional incentives and enforcement

While some of the zoning revisions mentioned earlier could help ensure new construction, or significant expansions, fit into the character of Franklin, on-going care of existing properties is an additional concern. While the Village has the ability, within the Historic District, to mandate repairs in order to prevent deterioration of historic structures, some members of the Historic District Commission have expressed a concern that enforcement standards are unclear and not

uniformly applied, allowing buildings to deteriorate too far before intervention.

A stepped-up enforcement procedure might include periodic physical inspections and encouragement of more preventative maintenance. Considerations could be considered to prevent the entire burden of more stringent enforcement from falling on a few property owners, and in recognition that maintaining historic character is of value to all residents of Franklin. If periodic building inspections were included, the Village could consider waiving whatever fees typically accompany investigations; critical structural maintenance projects might be considered as targets for a matching grant program. Any increased enforcement should have a well-defined process, including a clear resolution process for disputes between the Historic District Commission and property owners. Defining fair standards and processes should be a process that involves HDC members, affected property owners, and the Village officials who would be involved in enforcement.

Incentives might also help encourage homeowners outside of the Historic District to build or perform renovations in a historically compatible style. The *Design Guidelines* provide a good first step, by clearly defining historic design details. Further steps might be to sponsor homeowner consultations with architects or other experts experienced in historic styles, and providing a database of contractors who work with traditional building styles and materials.