FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Belleville’s Historic Preservation Commission Aims to Keep History Part of City’s Future

Belleville, Ill. – October 23, 2020 – Molly McKenzie spent a 32-year career working for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, and upon her retirement from that organization, the City of Belleville’s Historic Preservation Commission didn’t waste any time bringing her aboard because her expertise and knowledge are much sought after in a town like Belleville.

“Belleville is an historically significant town,” said McKenzie, who now serves as the commission’s chairperson. “Belleville was founded in 1814, which is a pretty old town for this region. When it became the county seat, it attracted a variety of different people including the French, Revolutionary War veterans and Germans. The successive waves of migration made Belleville a remarkably interesting melting pot of people.”

That’s why, according to the commission’s Vice Chair Ashley Pollock, it’s essential for residents in the city to know its history and preserve its built environment, one of the main goals of the commission. Pollock’s background as an educator with a master’s degree in U.S. history adds much needed and helpful expertise to the commission.

The commission was formed in 1972 by city ordinance, shortly after the former St. Clair County Courthouse was demolished. According to McKenzie and Pollock, a group of concerned citizens came together to discuss the need to preserve historic buildings within the City of Belleville.

“The founding commission was alarmed at the loss of such a beautiful and historic building,” said McKenzie. “Since then, the commission has worked to encourage preservation of historic buildings instead of tearing them down.”

To that, the commission has been integral, alongside residents of the neighborhoods, in establishing three local historic districts – the Hexenbuckel Historic District (1991), the Oakland Historic District (1995), and the Old Belleville Historic District (1974) – along with the Town of West Belleville Historic District, which was designated as such on the National Register of Historic Places in 2014. Both National Register districts and locally designated historic districts can be used as effective preservation tools to help conserve a community’s historic resources; however, the commission oversees the three local districts, but not the city’s National Register district.

“We’re definitely about preserving the brick and mortar and working together to maintain the historic assets in our neighborhoods,” said Pollock. “We’d love to expand the locations listed on the National Register of Historic Places and continue to work with residents to educate them and be a resource for them about preserving the architecture in Belleville.”

The City of Belleville, Illinois, incorporated in 1814, is the St. Clair County seat and the largest city in southern Illinois. With a current population of 44,478 (2010), Belleville is home to the longest contiguous main street in the United States, excellent education and healthcare organizations, and thriving businesses and neighborhoods, including three Local Historic Districts and one National Historic District. Mayor Mark Eckert runs the municipal government along with elected officials including City Clerk Jennifer Gain Meyer, Treasurer Dean Hardt, and 16 aldermen representing eight city wards. The vision for the City of Belleville is one where all sectors of the community work together to help the city grow and prosper and to become a model for other communities to follow.
According to McKenzie, the local historic districts were established to stabilize the urban core housing stock of Belleville, a city that has surpassed its bicentennial celebration. She said there is a misconception about the commission, though.

“Many people think our commission exists to tell people how to care for their homes,” she said. “That’s just not what we’re here to do. Rather, we’re here to be a resource and offer guidance on how to maintain the exterior of an historic home to retain the integrity of these neighborhoods. Historic districts are an effective way of protecting valuable residential and commercial property and ensuring us and future generations the opportunity to appreciate the historical uniqueness of our community of Belleville.”

With that, the commission reviews design requests and works with homeowners and contractors to maintain historically accurate designs. The commission follows the “Design Guideline/Policy and Procedures Manual” that provides information for property owners and the commission on appropriate methods to preserve and maintain the architectural character of the overall districts. It also offers workshops on topics like tuckpointing, window reglazing, and house history, creates a regular newsletter, and watches the demolition and tax delinquency records so that it might be able to intervene to save a worthy building.

In the wake of COVID-19, the commission has been as busy as ever as more people are working on home improvement projects, and thus reach out for design guidance and assistance as they upgrade their homes.

“The architectural variety in Belleville speaks to the city’s economic stability and socioeconomic diversity over time,” said McKenzie. “This is an historic phenomenon. There are all kinds of historic periods captured in the snapshot of this architecture, from giant Victorian mansions, to the laboring class’ little German street houses. There was little economic downturn in Belleville and that’s evidenced in these buildings.”

As for the future of the commission, it only seems to be gaining speed.

“We have built a lot of momentum around enhancing historic neighborhoods in Belleville,” said Pollock. “We would like to maintain that momentum and expand our reach. We’re primed for that because we’re seeing so many residents coming to Belleville to invest in these historic homes and buildings. You even see young people sharing their historic home journeys on social media, building community around what they do, and that’s awesome.”

Additional members of this volunteer commission include Justin Dominique, Andy Gaa, Nichole Hettenhausen, Jack LeChien, Keith Owens, and Linda Weisenstein.

To learn more about the City of Belleville’s Historic Preservation Commission, visit www.belleville.net/578/Historic-Preservation-Commission.
The City of Belleville, Illinois, incorporated in 1814, is the St. Clair County seat and the largest city in southern Illinois. With a current population of 44,478 (2010), Belleville is home to the longest contiguous main street in the United States, excellent education and healthcare organizations, and thriving businesses and neighborhoods, including three Local Historic Districts and one National Historic District. Mayor Mark Eckert runs the municipal government along with elected officials including City Clerk Jennifer Gain Meyer, Treasurer Dean Hardt, and 16 aldermen representing eight city wards. The vision for the City of Belleville is one where all sectors of the community work together to help the city grow and prosper and to become a model for other communities to follow.