

Tioga County Courier
September 30, 2017

Readers of the Tioga County Courier are aware, and others are becoming so, that the Village of Owego administration has in mind to amend the way changes within the Historic District are administered, by eliminating the oversight board, the Owego Historic Preservation Commission (OHPC). Reading the notice in last weeks' edition, one might assume that there must have been a slew of constituent complaints that precipitated this new law. One would be mistaken. Had there been a problem of that nature, the Commission would surely be aware of it, and been counseled by the mayor and trustees and been put on a corrective course. No such thing occurred.

A reader could logically conclude from the gist of the changed language, that there must have been trouble maintaining a quorum and that meetings were not held timely. Wrong again. In the eight-plus years I have been on the Commission, I recall only a single meeting wherein we did not muster a quorum.

Then it must be that the benefits the system had been providing to its' constituents had ceased to accrue. But, were that the case, would the Tioga State Bank renovation, and previously, the Coughlin and Gerhart renovation; the ongoing investment in the Parkview Hotel reconstruction, as well as the Nelson project on Front Streets' River Row, that broke ground last Friday, all of which required review by the Commission, (and all of which passed that review), have come to fruition? If the Commission were not in the "good graces" of SHPO the State Historic Preservation Office, you can be assured the grant monies that made these improvements to the business District possible would not have been forthcoming.

Another monumental construction project that benefits all of Tioga County and that would not, possibly, be as lovely as it turned out, is the Court Street Bridge. The administrations in the Town, County and Village were able to secure the more expensive, but much more aesthetically-pleasing design of the new bridge, in great measure, because of the existence of the District and the fact that we had, by then, secured the designation awarded by the Interior Department of CLG, (Certified Local Government). Add to these the Main Street Grants, Streetscape Grants, façade grants, etc., etc., and other Historic District improvements (many with the able assistance of the County EDP). Add to these some degree of the latitude and assistance we were afforded after the great flood of 2011.

The first home to ever be elevated in a Historic District in the State of New York (pop. 19 million), is the Greek revival-style home on Main Street. This project would/could not have occurred absent review by the Commission. Nor would it have been as heavily subsidized.

We have not yet mentioned the standard benefits afforded to any owner within the District who desires to resurrect the interior or exterior of a designated structure, who is willing to thoroughly document, and spend at least 5% of the renovation costs on the exterior of his home.

Beyond the strictly pecuniary, we all benefit from a sense of pride and the knowledge that what we and our neighbors have accomplished is, barring catastrophe, going to be preserved and maintained far into the future. Who doesn't occasionally or often, invite out-of-towners to stroll the District, confident it will impress and inspire?

This is what the Village mayor and his Trustees wish, for no stated purpose, to flush down the tubes. The proposed Local law #3 would eliminate our status as a CLG. It eliminates the requirement for review in light of "Commissioners Standards." Crucially, it removes the protections to which we've grown accustomed. When a Commercial building or homeowner has done an expensive renovation or appropriate augmentation to a building, it has been with the understanding that some adjacent building-owner would not be able to do a sub-standard, inappropriate, even ugly amendment of his own. There are standards. They are logical. They are uniform throughout the country. They are going to be tossed in the trash by this board with this legislation, for Owego.

Tiogans outside the Village might imagine that this is strictly a Village matter, and wish to ignore the controversy. In fact, the sales taxes collected in the Village are significant, and could well be adversely affected. As the inevitable watering-down of standards proceeds, and the Business District and neighborhoods are infiltrated by owners willing to cut corners, replace the authentic with "big-box" one-size-fits-all, cookie-cutter, "fake" and inauthentic details, our charm, and with it, our appeal as a destination for tourism and shopping will go with them. We who remain will remember who was to blame.

Mark Trabucco, Chair,
Owego Historic Preservation Commission