

**AN ANALYSIS OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
IN WINTER PARK  
and RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT**

Prepared by:  
Friends of Casa Feliz Preservation Advocacy Committee  
Karen James, Chair  
Sue Masselink  
Bonnie Osgood  
Aimee Spencer  
Betsy Owens

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## Preface

The mission of the Friends of Casa Feliz is to engage the public through education and advocacy for the purpose of preserving and promoting the community's rich architectural, historic and cultural heritage. The Friends organization has been concerned for some years with the loss of historic resources in Winter Park, and the limited protection for those that remain. Consequently, the Casa Feliz Preservation Advocacy Committee (CFPAC) was formed to research best practices in historic preservation and to make recommendations to the city based on these findings. The committee surveyed the 38 cities, each of which has obtained Certified Local Government (CLG) status, listed in Appendix A. Each member of the CFPAC has professional or volunteer experience in public policy and historic preservation—qualifications are detailed in Appendix B. Our recommendations for Winter Park are included in this report.

## Background

Founded in 1887, Winter Park is among the most historic cities in Florida. Of the 410 incorporated cities in the state, only 54 are as old or older than Winter Park. Other cities which value their heritage, and have strong ordinances to protect their historic structures, are actually decades younger than Winter Park, including Coral Gables (founded 1925), Palm Beach (founded 1911) and St. Petersburg (founded 1902). In the early days, city founders Loring Chase and Oliver Chapman were successful in attracting wealthy Northeasterners, like themselves, to build grand homes in Winter Park as a retreat during the harsh winter months. Along with the beautiful tree canopy, chain of lakes, and Park Avenue central business district, these fine historic homes, and those built over the following 50 years, set Winter Park apart as a gem in the helter-skelter sprawl of Central Florida. *National Geographic Traveler* magazine lauded the city's historic assets when it named Winter Park number 38 on its list of international historic destinations, which included Alexandria, Virginia (#47), Philadelphia (#66) and St. Augustine (#83). Yet, the magazine warned, the city “does run the risk of losing its 'old Florida' feel to too much 'new Florida' architecture.”

## Situation Analysis

In 2000, one of the city's most beloved historic homes, Casa Feliz, was threatened with demolition. A group of private citizens, the Friends of Casa Feliz, formed to raise more than \$1,000,000 to move and restore the 1933 brick and masonry farmhouse, the signature residential design of architect James Gamble Rogers II. In 2001, the city commission passed the city's first preservation ordinance, to help protect the Winter Park's historic architecture, and more generally, its heritage.

Today, it's clear that the ordinance passed twelve years ago, though well-intentioned, has serious shortcomings. One of the city's most historic homes, the 1885 Capen House, built on Lake Osceola by city pioneer James Seymour Capen, is threatened with demolition unless private dollars can be raised to move the house to safety. And while the Capen House crisis has garnered national media attention, it is merely symptomatic of the vulnerability of hundreds of historic homes in Winter Park.

**Demolitions:**

In Winter Park, symptoms of a weak historic preservation program aren't difficult to spot. Since 1993, more than 1 in every 8 single family homes, or 1,066 of 8,440, was demolished in the city. This ratio is about double the national average. Not surprisingly, areas with older homes and valuable land, such as the "Vias" in Winter Park, have been particularly hard-hit. In that neighborhood alone, 174 homes were razed in two decades, about 10 each year.

Naturally, not all of the homes that have been demolished would be considered 'historic' by objective measures. However, records show that of the 650 'historic resources' surveyed in 2001 by GAI Consultants for their National Register potential, sixty, or about 10%, were demolished in the 12 years that followed. Thirteen of those demolished would have qualified for the National Register of Historic Places. Notable buildings intentionally destroyed include the Annie Russell House on Via Tuscany, Grey Acres on Palmer Avenue, the Schultz Home ("Lacy Shadows") on New England, the Chase-Schenck Home on Palmer, Strong Hall and Corrin Hall on the Rollins campus, and all but one of the original homes on the Isle of Sicily.

**Weak Participation in Historic Register:**

*Individual Designations:* The Winter Park Register of Historic Places was created in 2001 for the purpose of honoring the city's most significant historic structures, and protecting them as community assets for future city residents. Register listings are entirely voluntary and initiated by the homeowner. While the register got off to a relatively strong start, with 60 buildings being listed in the first 5 years, participation has fallen off dramatically, with only 17 houses being listed between 2006 and today, or about 2 per year. Of the 132 remaining historic resources eligible for National Register status, only 18, or fewer than 14%, are protected from demolition by the Winter Park Register.

There are entire categories of houses that don't enjoy the protection the Register provides. For instance, in 2004 architectural historians Patrick and Debra McClane published the book "The Architecture of James Gamble Rogers II in Winter Park, Florida," which detailed the life work of the city's most prominent architect. Though Rogers designed more than 275 homes during his career, most of which would qualify for local register status, the book focused on 12 of his most important residential designs, built between 1929 and 1939. Of those 12, only two are protected from demolition by the Winter Park Register. Two others have already been demolished and one altered so dramatically as to be unrecognizable. Any of the remaining seven—including Rogers' spectacular Holt, Shippen and MacAlaster Houses—could be easily demolished by obtaining a basic 30-day demo permit.

*District Designations:* The Historic Preservation Ordinance also provides for the creation of historic districts within the city, to recognize and protect concentrations of historically or architecturally significant buildings. When the GAI survey was completed in 2001, nine potential districts were identified. Of those, only the College Quarter and a portion of the Virginia Heights districts were created as *local* districts in the 12 years that followed. Two others – Park Avenue and Interlachen Avenue—are listed on the National Register; however, contrary to popular belief, the National Register offers no protection from demolition. Further, whereas GAI identified 9 potential districts, other neighborhoods could objectively be considered for local

designation. For instance, the neighborhood south of Lake Osceola—consisting of Osceola Court, Alexander Place Chase Avenue and New England Avenue east of Interlachen—has a significant concentration of historic homes that could easily constitute a district. Similar concentrations of historic homes exist in Orwin Manor and in Forrest Hills around Lake Chelton, in addition to other areas, but aren't identified in the GAI survey.

## **Recommendations**

**I. Winter Park Historic Preservation Ordinance Revisions.** The Casa Feliz Preservation Advocacy Committee (CFPAC) recommends revisions to the Winter Park Historic Preservation Ordinance that reflect best practices in other communities throughout Florida. The following three sections of the ordinance should be revised, and one section added, to strengthen the city's ability to preserve the historic and architectural treasures that define and add immeasurable value to the city:

### **Section 58-455. Establishment of historic preservation board.**

CFPAC recommends strengthening board membership requirements. In comparison with the 38 other cities surveyed, Winter Park had the most permissive and non-specific requirements for membership on the Historic Preservation Board. We recommend that the ordinance specify that all members of the city HPB should have demonstrable interest or expertise in architecture or historic preservation. In order to ensure a historic preservation board that is made up of a well-balanced mix of individuals with expertise in a diverse array of professions, consistent with provisions of the Florida CLG program and the National Register Review Board, CFPAC recommends choosing seven members and two alternates from 10 areas of expertise, including architecture, construction or building trades, engineering, environmental science or landscape architecture, finance or banking, law, history, historic preservation or planning, real estate, or the social sciences. With the exception of architecture (of which there may be two), the CFPAC recommends that not more than one individual from any one of these areas of expertise be selected to serve on the board. The board may include one lay person who has a documented interest and participation in historic preservation efforts in Winter Park. As in other cities, in Winter Park the city's historic preservation officer should actively assist in the recruitment of citizens to serve on the board, and act as a resource to the mayor and city commission in weighing the merits of candidates. CFPAC further recommends that board members be residents of the city during their entire terms and not be city employees or hold an elected public office in city government.

### **Section 58-456. Designation Criteria.**

The National Register Review Board sets forth recommendations for how city ordinances should provide for the formation of locally-designated historic districts. Typically, a district can be proposed by some subset or an individual member of the Historic Preservation Board, a city commissioner, or a small percentage of residents of the proposed district. Then, the local HPB sends notification to the property owners in the proposed district, who have an opportunity to make their objections known. If a majority of property owners return a "no" ballot, the process is abandoned. Otherwise, the HPB, and then the City Commission, will consider the formation of a district.

In order for a historic district to be formed in Winter Park, the ordinance requires that 20% of the residents of the proposed district sign a petition in favor of district formation. Then, a threshold of at least two-thirds of the property owners in the proposed district must submit a ballot in favor of its formation. In comparison to the 38 other cities that CFPAC surveyed, Winter Park had the highest threshold.

The CFPAC recommends easing the district designation process. We recommend that a district be proposed by 15% of property owners, a member of the HPB, or a city commissioner. Notice of the proposed designation would go to all property owners within the boundaries of the proposed district, along with a blank statement of objection. Notarized statements of objection would be required from any property owners who had an objection to the designation. If statements of objection are received from a majority of the property owners, the application would proceed no further. Otherwise, the Planning Department would review the application and prepare a written analysis of the proposed designation, which would include: an explanation of historic significance of structures; map and discussion of proposed boundaries; description of architectural styles; and identification of structures that are contributing, contributing with alterations, or noncontributing.

The HPB would conduct a public hearing and make recommendations for or against the proposed designation based on the Planning Department's analysis and testimony from the hearing. If the HPB votes in favor of the designation, the recommendation would be forwarded to the City Commission. The City Commission would approve, approve with conditions, or deny the designation after a public hearing. Approval of the designation would be documented in the form of an ordinance.

The CFPAC believes that adopting such a process will greatly advance the GAI Report's recommendation that at least nine local districts be formed in Winter Park, where only two currently exist.

**Section 58-479. Guidance for issuance of certificates of appropriateness for demolition.** The CFPAC believes that Winter Park is much too lenient with regard to demolition permitting for older homes, which has resulted in the loss of scores of significant historic properties over the last 30 years. CFPAC recommends that a certificate of appropriateness from the Historic Preservation Board be required before a demolition permit can be issued for any home that is over 50 years old or that is listed on the Florida Master Site File. Owners who want to demolish all or part of a 50+ year-old or FMSF-listed home should be required to apply to the Historic Preservation Officer of the City of Winter Park, who would then conduct a full review and make a recommendation to the Historic Preservation Board. That recommendation could be to allow the demolition, or could require that the applicant make efforts to sell or otherwise preserve on site or move the historic resource. Only after the HPB is satisfied that reasonable efforts have been made to preserve a historically significant property would a demolition permit be issued. The CFPAC recommends looking to the Sarasota ordinance for language regarding demolition permitting for historic or older buildings.

**Section 58-Removal of Historic Designation (New Section).** CFPAC recommends adding this section to provide a systematic approach for removing a historic designation. It should set grounds for removal, such as: conditions under which the property would no longer meet applicable criteria for designation; that the property in question is an imminent hazard to public safety or that making repairs would be financially prohibitive; types of errors that may have been made during the designation process that would render the designation invalid; and violations of the terms and conditions of the designation. It should also cover all the steps that need to be taken by the owner, the WP planning department, the HPB, and the city commission in order to remove a historic designation.

**II. Participation in the Certified Local Government (CLG) Program.** The CFPAC recommends applying for Certified Local Governments (CLG) status. Many of Winter Park's Central Florida regional neighbors are already CLGs, including Daytona Beach, Deland, Eatonville, Eustis, Kissimmee, Lakeland, Orlando, New Smyrna Beach, Sanford, and Windermere. A number of benefits accrue to communities designated as CLGs. Grant funding is available on a matching basis, typically at a level of about \$25,000. These grants can be used for a variety of historic preservation projects, including survey and planning activities, preparation of National Register nominations, and community education projects. Florida's CLG program has assisted in the survey, designation, and preservation of thousands of historic and archaeological resources. CLG-designated cities also qualify for technical training for city staff and HP board members, both on site and at regional meetings.

**III. Promoting Historic Preservation in Winter Park:** Winter Park's Historic Preservation Ordinance states that "The Winter Park Historic Preservation Board is responsible for the development and administration of a comprehensive historic preservation program, and shall identify and maintain the city's historic resources for the benefit of present and future residents."

Currently it does not appear that a comprehensive preservation plan is being pursued by top city management or the historic preservation board. The historic preservation officer in Winter Park has accomplished a remarkable amount over the last 15 years, given that historic preservation is just one relatively small facet of her job description. We believe historic preservation, given its importance to our community, warrants a full-time position in the planning department. Furthermore, the HP officer should have ample management, staff and board support to complete the ambitious goals set forth in the ordinance. Currently, the HP board members are neither seen as advocates for preservation in the community, nor as a resource to help advance preservation. As demonstrated elsewhere in this paper, there is a determined need and directive for a plan that includes goals and objectives, assigned tasks, due dates, and the evaluation of program effectiveness.

The Casa Feliz Advocacy Committee surveyed 38 cities throughout the state to ascertain the tactics employed and programs sponsored by their HP boards that were particularly effective in promoting preservation. The committee's findings of best practices for administration and implementation of a historic preservation program are:

1. A public education and awareness program regarding the benefits of historic preservation and home and neighborhood designations.
2. A citywide annual “Historic Preservation Week.” Activities for the week may include the following:
  - Identification of significant historic rehabilitations in the city with signage, plaques, and publicity.
  - Recognition of individuals responsible for administration and implementation of historic preservation goals with annual awards.
  - Providing plaques for locally designated properties (already done in Winter Park).
  - Tour of historic homes or gardens.
  - The city’s Historic Preservation week could be planned to dovetail with Casa Feliz’s annual Colloquium on Historic Preservation.
3. The offering of Preservation Workshops for city residents who own historic properties or who are interested in historic preservation. Topics may include historic craftsmanship techniques, energy efficiency, financing improvements, and researching a building’s history, or other topics appropriate in meeting the goals of the Historic Preservation Board. Additional topics may be determined by public interest.
4. Maps to highlight locally designated individual homes and historic districts to promote “heritage tourism.”
5. Educational videos and Public Service Announcements on the City of Winter Park’s website via a “webisode.” The addition of links on the city’s historic preservation web page to the Winter Park Historical Museum and Casa Feliz so visitors may find more information on the city’s history and preservation efforts.
6. The utilization of city publications and city emails (citE-news) to publicize each home or district that is designated locally or nationally, or in receipt of a state award.
7. Information about the Historic Preservation Board added to the city’s website and included in the “Residents” tab.
8. Help with marketing historic homes for sale through the city’s website.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **CLG-Designated Governments Surveyed by Casa Feliz Advocacy Committee**

Boynton Beach  
Coral Gables  
Daytona Beach  
Deland  
Delray Beach  
Fernandina Beach  
Fort Lauderdale  
Fort Myers  
Fort Pierce  
Gainesville  
Islamorada  
Jacksonville  
Jupiter  
Key West  
Kissimmee  
Lake Worth  
Lakeland  
Melbourne  
Miami  
Miami Beach  
Miami-Dade County  
Mount Dora  
New Smyrna Beach  
Ocala  
Orlando  
Palm Beach County  
Palm Beach  
Plant City  
Pompano Beach  
St. Augustine  
St. Pete Beach  
St. Petersburg  
Sanford  
Sarasota  
Tallahassee  
Tampa  
Volusia County  
West Palm Beach

## **APPENDIX B**

### **CASA FELIZ PRESERVATION ADVOCACY COMMITTEE**

**Karen James, Chair:** Karen James was a board member of the Winter Park Historical Association for six years and served as President of the board for two years. She also served one term on the City's Historic Preservation Board and is currently Vice Chair of the Friends of Casa Feliz.

**Sue Masselink:** As a relative newcomer to Winter Park, Sue Masselink has been disappointed to see the rate at which charming older homes are being destroyed, changing the character of the community she and her husband chose for their retirement years. They moved from the Washington, DC area, where Sue had a long federal career as a national program manager at the U.S. Department of Transportation.

**Bonnie Osgood:** Bonnie Hughes Osgood, a board member of the Winter Park Historical Museum since 2011, has volunteered as a community activist in Winter Park since 1965. She lives in Virginia Heights, one of Winter Park's historically designated neighborhoods. She is an associate professor of psychology at Valencia College.

**Aimee Spencer:** Aimee Spencer is a resident of a historic home in Winter Park that she and her husband have preserved. Recently, they were awarded an outstanding achievement award from the Florida Trust for Historic Preservation. Aimee has also restored a historic home in Orlando, and is a textile designer by trade.

**Betsy Owens:** As executive director of the Friends of Casa Feliz, Betsy Owens oversees all museum, rental, and public outreach programs of the organization. She is the primary administrator for the annual James Gamble Rogers Colloquium on Historic Preservation, and writes about preservation for the Casa Feliz blog, Preservation Winter Park. She has worked in nonprofit management for 16 years, after two years with the federal government.