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Marin Voice: San Rafael needs to take next step for historic preservation



Fourth Street in San Rafael, circa 1905. (Courtesy of Marin History Museum)



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Whether you support the flood of new housing plans, oppose it or are a bewildered person trying to understand the changing housing laws in our state, one thing is clear: San Rafael is going to look quite different in the future.

Lawyers, the state Legislature and community activists will continue to clash over the limits of maximum height and density, but the reality is that we will have many more residents downtown. As we move forward, size must not be the only consideration. We need to think about the quality of life for our new and longtime residents. We need to consider what will bring people downtown and keep them coming back.

One of San Rafael's greatest assets is the downtown collection of old homes and commercial buildings.

"Downtown's older buildings and pedestrian scale ... create an ambiance that draws people to shop, dine, stroll, socialize and visit," according to [the city website](#). "Downtown's historic buildings give it a powerful sense of place and connect us to our past. Preserving these resources ... helps attract unique businesses and arts establishments, and gives our city its heart and soul."

Despite that, and the fact that an entire chapter of the Downtown Precise Plan is dedicated to historic preservation, many of the tasks set forth have not been completed. Considerable thought went into the plan approved in 2021, but it lacks a mechanism for getting the work done.

Many Bay Area governments place this responsibility in a historic preservation commission. Belvedere, Larkspur, Sausalito and Tiburon (among many others in the Bay Area) have preservation commissions. Members of the commissions are appointed. They perform a variety of tasks including designating landmarks, reviewing alterations to historic buildings, surveying historic resources, providing incentives for adaptive reuse of older structures and working for development that aligns with historic character.

If we had a historic preservation commission, San Rafael could become certified through the California Office of Historic Preservation and thereby qualify for grants and technical assistance. At a time when we are all trying to navigate our way through complex housing laws, it would be immensely helpful to have easy access to others facing the same issues. We could surely use some help figuring out how to revitalize parts of our bedraggled Fourth Street corridor.

The state program also confers economic and quality-of-life benefits:

“Where preservation is supported by local government policies and incentives, designation can increase property values and pride of place,” according to [the state website](#). “Revitalization of historic downtowns and adaptive reuse of historic districts and buildings conserves resources, uses existing infrastructure, generates local jobs and purchasing, supports small business development and heritage tourism and enhances quality of life and community character.”

Through a historic preservation commission, we could also do the other things laid out in the city’s downtown plan: updating our historic preservation ordinance to include objective design standards and recognized historic preservation standards; updating the survey of historic resources and reinvigorating the process of formally recognizing historic landmarks (none have been added since the 1980s); and establishing incentives to encourage builders and owners to preserve historic buildings or use historic architectural styles.

While these things could theoretically be done through the Planning Commission or the Department of Community and Economic Development, it makes sense to have a dedicated commission that is not focused on broader development issues.

The costs of having a commission are not that great. It would require some staff time, but the cost of the commissioners would be minimal. On existing commissions, the city pays only a [\\$50 per month](#) stipend – an exceptionally good deal since many commissioners are subject matter experts, and not all commissioners request the stipend. Also, there are a number of vacancies on existing commissions, further reducing city expenditures. The benefits of having a historic preservation commission would far exceed the monetary costs.

In February 2026, the San Rafael City Council held a study session focused on downtown development. There will be a follow-up study session in the next few months. The council would be wise to include historic preservation as a core part of downtown development – starting with establishing a historic preservation commission with the power to pursue the steps so thoughtfully outlined in the downtown plan. The San Rafael Heritage Board of Directors strongly supports this approach and stands ready to help.

Sue Burrell serves on the executive board of the [San Rafael Heritage](#) organization, which promotes the preservation of historic resources and architecturally significant buildings.

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