



DATE: October 24, 2016

AGENDA ITEM #4

AGENDA REPORT

TO: Historical Commission
FROM: Sean Gallegos, Staff Liaison
SUBJECT: Fallen Leaf Historic District

BACKGROUND

The Fallen Leaf Park Preservation neighborhood group is pursuing a historic district designation for 37 homes located in the Fallen Leaf Park Unit No. 2 tract along Clay Drive, Alexander Way and Fallen Leaf Lane. The proposed district contains a high concentration of single-family homes built in the late 1960s in the mid-century Eichler style. Attachment A provides a letter from the Fallen Leaf Park Preservation group and attachment B provides a map of the proposed historic district.

The City's Historic Preservation Ordinance (Municipal Code Chapter 12.44) outlines the required process for establishing a historic district. Historic districts are established through the creation of an overlay zone that retains the underlying zoning. As part of the process to establish a Historic District, the Historical Commission, Planning and Transportation Commission and City Council will need to find that the historic district has a sufficient level of physical integrity and historical significance to merit designation.

Property owners, the City Council, the Planning and Transportation Commission, the Historical Commission or the Community Development Director, may initiate the process of designating districts. Property owners may initiate the designation of a historic district by collecting at least 25% of the frontage of all recorded lots abutting a specific geographic section of the city.

The City has not previously adopted an overlay zone for a historic district; therefore, the proposed application may result in the first historic district for the City. The City has adopted single-story overlay zones for eight neighborhoods and adopted one overlay district related to land use for the Loyola Corners Neighborhood Commercial Center Specific Plan.

Attachments:

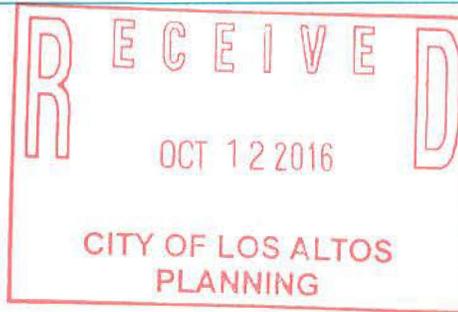
- A. Letter, Fallen Leaf Park Preservation
- B. Proposed Fallen Leaf Historic District

ATTACHMENT A

FALLEN LEAF PARK PRESERVATION

1674 CLAY DRIVE LOS ALTOS, CA 94024

Members of the Historical Commission
City of Los Altos
Los Altos, CA 94022



October 10, 2016

Dear Commission Members:

The purpose of this letter and our presentation to you at your meeting on October 24 is to provide you with an update concerning our efforts to receive a Historic District Designation and overlay (HDD) from the City for the Fallen Leaf Park (FLP) neighborhood. We attended the Commission meeting on July 27, 2015, and informed you of our intention to seek an HDD. Since then we have moved through the various preparatory steps required to submit a formal application. Because we are the first neighborhood in Los Altos to apply for an HDD, we want to keep you informed of our progress.

Context:

The Fallen Leaf Park neighborhood is a community of 37 homes developed by Joseph Eichler in 1968, the larger of two Eichler subdivisions located in Los Altos. Eichler, a merchant builder, built over 11,000 tract homes in the years following WW II and until 1974, most of them in the Bay Area. Influenced by Frank Lloyd Wright, he differentiated himself from other such builders of that era by hiring mid-century modern architects to design his houses. All are sufficiently similar to have become known eponymously and simply as "Eichlers" and are easily recognized by most who have lived in this area for any length of time.

Our interest in historic preservation of the FLP homes emerged as we became increasingly concerned that many homes in Los Altos, particularly those in South Los Altos, were being modified and enlarged, while also knowing that the original architecture and neighborhood continuity of numerous Eichlers in nearby communities had been defaced, replaced, or significantly changed in non-complementary ways. The homes in FLP are largely intact, and we recognized a window of opportunity to enlist our neighbors to protect the architectural integrity of the homes and the look and feel of our neighborhood. Of the options available to us to accomplish this goal, seeking the HDD was most feasible.

Following is a summary of what we've accomplished to date:

Learning, research, outreach, and collaboration:

From the outset, we have immersed ourselves in learning about Eichler homes; Joseph Eichler and his contributions; mid-century modern architecture; the historic preservation process and its requirements; relevant Los Altos City Code and history; preservation efforts and strategies in

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other Eichler communities; and the benefits, risks, responsibilities, and points of resistance about various district overlay processes.

- We sourced relevant documents, including the original applications submitted by the other three Eichler communities that have received historic designations.
- We met with staff and volunteers at the Los Altos History Museum.
- We were invited to write the lead article for an issue of the LAHM's newsletter and did.
- We've consulted with Eichler-specialist realtors to better understand the local real estate market and dynamics affecting the purchase and sale of Eichlers in particular.
- We have consulted with staff in the State Office of Historic Preservation, the leaders of past and current formal preservation efforts in other Eichler neighborhoods, City Staff in nearby communities to understand how their architectural guidelines were developed, and the chair of the Architectural Review Committee of the Lucas Valley Homeowners' Association to better understand guideline compliance and enforcement issues.
- When contacted by or referred to Eichler owners from other communities that are engaged in preservation efforts, we learned from and helped educate them.

Defined and justified a Historic District:

The first step was to define the District for which we're seeking historic recognition and protection, both the basis for the application and the geographic boundaries. The historical and architectural significance of Eichler homes and the contributions of Joseph Eichler have been well established by previous historical designations. Individual properties must be concentrated within a bounded geographic area. In the case of FLP, Eichler developed portions of two adjacent tracts, eventually selling the remaining lots. The 37 houses, all clearly identifiable by their common architectural style and design features, are arranged along three intersecting streets (Fallen Leaf Lane, Clay Drive, and Alexander Way) that form a contiguous neighborhood.

Informed neighbors and collected petition signatures:

In April 2015, we began communicating directly with Fallen Leaf Park homeowners. We contacted all of them in writing and made face-to-face visits with most to discuss the risks to our Eichlers and need for formal preservation action, to describe our proposed project, and to seek their support by signing an application petition. Significantly, over 70% signed this petition while 10% refused. We were unable to contact the remainder despite frequent attempts. (It's worth noting that the City requires that only 25% sign a petition in order to proceed with an application.)

Applied for and received a waiver of the application fee:

Between November 2015 and January 2016, we applied to City Council for a waiver of the \$4500 application fee, appearing before Council along with several neighbors to present our request and case. Council unanimously approved our request.

Raised monies to cover the direct costs of the project:

Our conservative budget for estimated project-related costs, including retaining the historical consultant, preparing and publishing architectural guidelines, and other miscellaneous items is

\$15,000, to be raised from homeowners. Most responded generously and we have raised over \$12,000 to date.

Hired a Historic Professional to survey the properties, write the historic context statement, and prepare the formal application:

Seth Bergstein, Principal of PAST Consultants, is our historic professional under contract. To date he has completed research for the historic context statement and conducted the historic resources survey of subject properties based on both common and local character defining features (CDFs) of the FLP Eichler homes. His preliminary assessment is that 33 of the 37 houses retain sufficient character defining features to be considered contributing to the historic merit of the proposed district. We are delighted by this assessment, as it proves that Fallen Leaf Park represents one of the most "intact" collections of Eichlers in all of California.

Prepared a draft of Architectural Guidelines:

We have developed a set of Guidelines that describe the character-defining features and original attributes of the properties that need to be maintained in order to meet the City's requirement that they retain the attributes that were present at the time of construction and specify how that can best be done going forward. These guidelines were developed based on four sources:

1. the City's requirements for preservation of historic properties
2. the generally accepted and documented CDFs for all Eichlers
3. those developed by our consultant for use in FLP
4. and a comparison and analysis of the existing Guidelines from the four other Eichler communities that have them.

The Guidelines pertain only to features of the house that are visible from the "public way." They were written with two primary stakeholder groups in mind, the homeowners and the Historical Commission which, as representatives of the City, is chartered to hear and approve applications for certain modifications to historic properties. We are currently in the process of receiving feedback from homeowners about the proposed guidelines.

Held a face-to-face meeting with neighbors:

On October 8, 2016, we held an informational meeting to which all Fallen Leaf Park owners were invited. At this time we did an overall summary and update of the project, introduced Seth Bergstein who led a tutorial on the survey and assessment process; explained the guideline development process and invited their feedback; and offered information from guest Kevin Swartz of Erdal Team Realtors about the Los Altos housing market, the dynamics of the Eichler market, and the effects of being in a historic district on the buying and selling of Eichlers.

Met with City Planning staff in person and by phone:

We've met several times with City planners to better understand various aspects of the historic district designation process, requirements, and responsibilities.

Provided regular and frequent updates to neighbors:

We've provided formal written project updates to neighbors on at least six occasions. We've also provided additional informal updates to neighbors throughout the past 18 months.

Next Steps:

Our goal is to submit the formal application to you by the end of November. It's our understanding that it will first be reviewed by City Staff, and then presented to and heard by the Historical Commission, the Planning and Transportation Commission, and finally the City Council.

We'll be happy to answer any questions you may have at this point and look forward to engaging with you on the application soon.

Respectfully,



Tracy Gibbons and Nate Johnson
Project Leaders



ATTACHMENT B

Proposed Eichler Historic District

