



27 May 2025

HFFI's Preservation Advocacy Report
(presented at the regular meeting of City Council, 5/27/25)

Good evening, Madame Mayor and City Councilors & happy national Preservation month to the City of Fredericksburg!

The month of May marks a time to celebrate the historic places and spaces that enrich our lives and the landscape around us, and the people who have worked to save them for the greater benefit of our community. It's a time to take stock of what we gain from the preservation of Fredericksburg's past in our present, if not our future.

HFFI's mission is to protect, preserve, and revitalize the distinctive historic environment and cultural resources of this city, but this organization exists because of our community's conscious commitment to stewarding this historically significant city.

The value we place on Fredericksburg's historic fabric is high. The new Comp Plan Public Survey Summary shows us that "Managing growth," "Preserving Character," and "Historic Preservation" ranked high among the most important issues identified by respondents (pg. 2 overview). It also revealed "Historic Charm & Preservation" as the #1 strength (pg. 23), listing the "historic sites, preserved architecture, and cultural activities that enhance Fredericksburg's unique character and appeal" as key benefits to residents (pg. 25). Historic, Charming, and Community - the three most common words describing our city (pg. 27).

The strength and clarity of our shared sense of community identity stems from the value we place on the preservation of our distinctive environment. When asked how best to balance our "historical nature" while also growing, most respondents urged City planners to focus "on preserving and repurposing historic buildings for modern uses" (pg. 31).

Last May, HFFI's letter to Council highlighted several goals set by City staff based on public input and more than 20 members of a Historic Preservation Working Group. Some key goals became top priority tasks of City Council in the years that followed. HFFI hoped the most feasible and broad reaching of those goals might be accomplished within a year, namely:

- 1) Establishing a Historic Preservation Advisory Committee;
- 2) Funding a city-wide Historic Preservation Economic Impact Study; and
- 3) Expanding financial incentives to support the preservation and rehabilitation of the city's older commercial and residential assets.

Sadly, and not for City staff's lack of effort, little progress has been made on these important goals and the FY26 budget gives little to those who dared to hope. What explains some leaders' lack of curiosity and poor understanding of Preservation practices, benefits, and connections within our community? Are Fredericksburg's leaders—some elected, appointed, and hired—disinterested in acting upon our

Preservation goals and expert recommendations? Surely not. So why have these goals fallen through the cracks?

Perhaps the City lacks sufficient resources, financial and human-powered? Many important issues in our City are addressed by citizen volunteer groups working in conjunction with staff and Council representatives. We have a Clean and Green Commission; a Recreation Commission and Pathways Committee; a Housing Advisory Commission; an Economic Development Authority, Arts Commission, and a Parking Advisory Committee... All supported by administrative staff to ensure these issues do not suffer from lack of awareness. Yet no committee supports one of the most important “quality of life” indicators of our City?*

Preservation has some of the highest returns on investment in the local economy, supporting skilled jobs, small businesses, charming residents and visitors alike—while also sustaining the historic places we love and the cultural vibrancy of our town. Yet staff’s repeated Capital Improvement Plan requests for \$50,000 to conduct a historic preservation economic impact study for the whole city has fallen on deaf ears?

Preservation practice and initiatives advance multiple City goals and objectives. One such example is the goal to **expand the City’s Rehabilitation Tax Credit program**—which provides a brief period of tax relief to support property owners that rehabilitate older buildings. An expert report produced for the City in June 2023 reviewed available financial incentives for Preservation, outlining a range of options for leveraging greater economic benefits from this specific program. All the options presented would support the safe upgrading and re-use of existing buildings and generate substantial economic benefits to the City and its residents.

In 2021, the Clean and Green Commission’s Sustainability Committee added this goal to City Council’s top priority task list, to promote reuse of our existing building stock. This program also applies to commercial buildings, so increasing its value would further long-standing Economic Development. But perhaps most importantly, this Preservation goal also helps the City’s Housing needs, noted in the Community Block Development Grant (CDBG) plan. Adopted at Council’s last meeting, this plan calls for investing our limited resources into the preservation of Fredericksburg’s existing stock of affordable housing and highlights staff’s strategies to promote community stability using **Neighborhood Conservation Districts (NCDs)**; develop opportunities for homeownership; and aggressively maintain existing housing stock (pg. 17, 82).

All such goals and planning documents reflect untold hours of residents’ time and effort. HFFI thanks City Planning staff, members of the ARB and Planning Commission, City Councilors, and especially the residents who have taken the time to explore the potential of NCDs. Over the past 6-8 months, this public dialogue has explored the effects and benefits of NCD overlays as a planning tool to help us navigate growth, not stop it.

It seems many residents can see how good Preservation planning pays off in spades for the City of Fredericksburg. We hope our leaders will invest more time and energy to support important preservation goals in the year ahead. HFFI remains ready to provide technical assistance and resources to support the City. Thank you for caring and sharing your time.

***Call for Volunteers and Community Support!** Do you have an interest in local historic places and spaces? Expertise to share? A desire to learn more about Preservation’s benefits to our community, the City’s Historic Preservation program, or its local initiatives? Help HFFI and support City staff in moving forward on important goals—contact Danae Peckler, HFFI’s Preservationist and SOI-qualified Architectural Historian at preservationist@hffi.org or pay us a visit at the Lewis Store!