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Historical Society vies for historic markers

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Group to submit its first location application for designation this month

ROCHESTER — The greater Rochester area is riddled with historic landmarks, and local historians are trying to get them the attention they deserve.

For some time now, the Rochester-Avon Historical Society has been doing massive amounts of research in an attempt to have the well-known green Michigan Historical Marker designation applied to roughly half a dozen locations in the community. They're also shooting for the blue signs that note whether a property is a part of the National Register of Historic Places.

The feat does not come easily, however. The government officials who issue the designations go through the applications and submitted evidence with "a fine-tooth comb," said Rod Wilson, president of the Historical Society. Not to mention, the green Michigan designation signs cost \$2,500 each.

"We actually have a list of — a two-page, single spaced list — of locations we feel deserve to be looked at for either for the Michigan or the national designation throughout Rochester and Rochester Hills," he said, adding that the society covers both areas. "We're doing this by ourselves, but you have to involve the property owners."

Wilson couldn't reveal the six properties the society is working on getting designated, but did say some are locations people in the community may be familiar with. They plan on submitting their first application this month.

Debbie Larsen, "researcher extraordinaire" and chairwoman of the Historical Society, said she and her colleagues have been "digging into all sorts of old records, newspapers, deeds, census forms and tax records" to find all possible history embedded into the locations they feel deserve the designation.

"It's been fascinating, really," she said. "We're working on several properties, and our goal here is to get some acknowledgement for some of the historic treasures we have in Rochester/Rochester Hills. People drive by some of these old buildings and say, 'Wow, look at that old building,' and they don't even realize how important it is to the fabric to the area's heritage."

The designations would not only mark a location as significant to the community and alert passersby to its history, she continued, but they'll also educate people on the site and help recognize the efforts of those who've preserved them over the years.

Wilson said that oftentimes property owners don't realize the designations don't prohibit a building from being altered or leveled. "They're just honorary designations," he explained. "The only law or ordinance that can keep a building from being torn down is a local (municipal) historic district. These two designations are

not historic districts.”

Still, he warned, “People should sure think twice about tearing down a building.”

Larsen is the assistant librarian at Mount Clemens Public Library and has a concentration in local history. She said the historic designations, while expensive, can possibly even earn their worth.

“Other than the pride of place, the education and the recognition of historical properties, certain types of recognition can bring tax breaks when a certain type of work is being done on the property,” she said. For example, she explained, in some cases, when the owner of a historically designated property needs to do renovations to keep the location up to historic codes, federal, state and even municipal assistance may apply.

The committee in charge of approving the historic designation applications meets only three times a year in Lansing. Wilson said the society is shooting for the national designations first — No. 1, because they’re less expensive and, No. 2, because it’s easier to get the state designation once a property is in the National Register of Historic Places.

As far as paying for the signs, the society will pay for a large portion of it, but will ask the property owner to chip in. Wilson did not know the exact cost of the national signs, but does know they’re smaller in size than the green signs, and therefore are more affordable.

“Our community is so historic. We’ve talked about doing this in the past, and now we have a committee in place to make it start happening,” he said. “We have a pretty historic town, and our goal is to get green signs all over the place. The more green, the better.”

The society should know by September whether its earned historic designation on the first property they’re submitting paperwork on. One clue: It’s in downtown Rochester.

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