

Published on C & G Newspapers (<http://www.candgnews.com>)

Rochester

October 10, 2012

Rochester-Avon Historical Society receives State History Award

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ROCHESTER — For a second year in a row, the Historical Society of Michigan has recognized the Rochester-Avon Historical Society with a State History Award.

Officials say it's the highest recognition presented by the state's official historical society.

"The Awards Committee of the Historical Society of Michigan was very impressed by the comprehensive nature of the Oakland Regional Historic Sites' content and how usable it is to such a broad audience. They deserve recognition for the extent of this effort and its historical impact," Historical Society of Michigan Executive Director Larry J. Wagenaar said in an email.

The Rochester-Avon Historical Society received a State History Award last month in the category of "Communications: Newsletters and Websites" for its new website, oaklandregionalhistoricsites.org, which was recognized for serving as a "valuable tool for government officials, real estate professionals, and history enthusiasts" because it "supports local history education, raises awareness of historic preservation and promotes heritage tourism."

"This award is a huge award for any organization, having the website of the year for the whole state," said Rochester-Avon Historical Society President Jim Hopkins. "We were just elated that we got acknowledged for the work that we had done. It's just a crowning glory, in a sense, putting that on top of everything that we've done. It's been almost two years of a lot of work."

Sponsored and led by the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, the Oakland Regional Historic Sites website is a collaboration of various historical agencies of the greater Rochester area, including the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, the Rochester Hills Historic District Commission, the Rochester Historical Commission, the Oakland Township Historical Society and the Oakland Township Historic District Commission.

Rochester-Avon Historical Society Research Committee Chair Deborah Larsen said the project was designed to move local history education in the area to a new, more accessible level.

"Nobody who is working on the ORHS website signed on to win awards, but rather to make our community better aware of its rich history. The recognition we have received from our peers in the form of the State History Award is icing on the cake for us," she said in an email.

Launched in October of 2011, the website serves as a comprehensive public resource featuring historic buildings, significant objects, notable monuments and memorials. The site identifies each property on a map and is searchable by county, city, partial street address and architectural classification. When a user

selects a given location, the website provides current photos and information detailing that property's history.

"It's not just a website that looks nice and gives you information, it enhances the heritage awareness in the community," Hopkins said.

He said the database is meant to encourage local history education and research, appreciation and support of local resources, and heritage tourism by increasing people's and groups' awareness of the historic properties and areas in their communities.

"We're obviously very proud of all the work that went into it, from all the different people involved, and how it really puts us on the map, so to speak," he said. "We're trying to take this Internet/electronic age to a whole new level when it comes to historical societies, and it seems to be working very well. We're getting new members, we're getting a lot of accolades, we're getting some nice press, and it's bringing more and more awareness of Rochester and its downtown."

Historical Society members intentionally created the website with a regional scope in the hopes that neighboring communities will join the effort and make the site a truly regional resource. Thus far, the Oakland Township Historical Society, Oakland Township, the Orion Township Historical Society, the Clawson Historical Museum and the Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society have added information to the site.

"We set the site up so it will hopefully expand into broader and broader areas to give other historical societies and commissions the opportunity to put their information out there too, so that they don't have to go through the same process we did to invent and create a website," he said.

Hopkins said it will serve as a learning tool for residents, teachers, students, government officials, real estate professionals, planning commissioners and more.

"It's hopefully going to broaden the view of everyone in Michigan as to what's out there, what is our history, what are we trying to say, what's our heritage, and how does that relate to the community when we lose something. ... It's really broad based in making people aware and bringing the information to them," he added.

The Rochester-Avon Historical Society was founded in 1969 to "help preserve, collect and interpret the history of the greater Rochester area for present and future generations." The group holds monthly meetings with guest speakers, a variety of downtown historical walking tours, and monthly lunchtime talks with longtime residents, among other projects.

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Source URL: <http://www.candgnews.com/news/rochester-avon-historical-society-receives-state-history-award>