

Historic preservation in Atlantic City could be key to economic growth

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ATLANTIC CITY — Scattered throughout the city's 48 blocks are monuments and structures that speak to the rich and varied history of the seaside resort.

The newly formed Historic Preservation Commission has been tasked with identifying buildings and areas of the city that are integral parts of Atlantic City's past and, possibly its future.

At its orientation meeting Thursday, the preservation commission was briefed by planning professional and consultant Sarah Birdsall about its responsibilities, which include completing an inventory list of historic sites in Atlantic City.

The goal of the commission is two-fold: preserve and maintain the city's history while assisting officials with economic development.

"Study after study has shown that the economic benefits of historical preservation do benefit the community," Birdsall told the commission.

Mayor Frank Gilliam Jr., who appointed the commission's members, said historic preservation complements the city's economic development efforts by diversifying its options.

"The Historic Preservation Commission will be a catalyst for economic revitalization and stabilization in city neighborhoods previously unrecognized as potential economic generators," Gilliam said. "Atlantic City's newly created Historic Preservation Commission positions the city to benefit from the positive economic impacts, including job creation, tax revenue generation and increase in property values, associated with historic preservation efforts elsewhere in New Jersey."

The appointed members are Tom Sykes, Heather Halpin Perez, Anthony Vraim, Joyce Hegan, Jean Muchanic, Ralph Hunter and Sonny Ireland. Libby Wells and Carol Ruffu are two alternates.

Atlantic City has now joined nearly 165 other municipalities in the state with a dedicated historic preservation group.

The state Legislature is considering tax credits for historic preservation efforts, according to Jim Rutala, a certified planner and municipal consultant. Those credits could aid the city in promoting development. Rutala said the tax credits would be a "unique tool" for entrepreneurs and developers looking to do business in Atlantic City.

The commission will adopt bylaws and appoint officers at its next meeting on Aug. 14.

One of its first actions will be to petition to the state to become part of the certified local government program, which will enable the city to participate more directly in historic preservation grant opportunities. Historic

preservation grants are unique in that they are deemed “set-aside” monies, which means the governing body does not have to provide matching funds to receive them.

Bob Ruffolo, former chairman of the Atlantic City Historical Museum and owner of Princeton Antiques Book Shop on Atlantic Avenue, said he had confidence in the commission’s members to succeed.

“They’re all first-rate people on the board,” he said. “They’re all doers.”

One of the challenges the commission will have is multi-generational small business owners who occupy many of the city’s historic buildings that the efforts will have an immediate and long-term benefit, Ruffolo suggested.

“History needs to be preserved,” he said. “But, in order to have successful preservation, you have to have (locals) with a sense of pride in order for it to work.”

Atlantic City has eight sites on the state’s Register of Historic Places and 22 additional buildings that have been deemed eligible for inclusion. There are 39 additional sites identified in the city’s Master Plan that warrant consideration. Additionally, a 2013 study conducted by the University of Pennsylvania established the potential for neighborhood historic districts, including Ducktown, Chelsea and the Northside.

Seven locations in Atlantic City that were either listed on the national or state registry of historic sites have already been demolished, including the Blenheim, Homlhurst, Morton and Traymore hotels. Eight other locations in the city that were deemed eligible for the registry at one point in time have also been demolished.