



Inside Auburn's Comprehensive Plan Vision and Value Statement: Character

A labor of love: restoring the character of the historic Masonic Temple

In 2015, the City of Auburn updated its Comprehensive Plan, a document that sets a vision for the future and determines what the city will be like 20 years from now and beyond. Auburn's Comprehensive Plan is the leading policy document that guides the city's evolution and growth. The Plan addresses a broad range of issues and sets policy direction for:

- Housing
- Land Use
- Transportation
- Economic Development
- Parks and Open Space
- Environmentally Sensitive Areas
- Community Health
- Historic Preservation
- Public Service and Facilities

When the plan was last updated, it was organized around seven main value statements that were developed by you, our community members. The seven value statements highlight topics that are important to the community and establish a basis for evaluating future city policies, regulations, actions, investments, budget priorities, grant-seeking priorities, and other community decisions.

In this edition, we will highlight the value statement, character, and how the recent renovations at the historic Masonic Temple help to promote this value. Character as defined in the plan means *developing and preserving attractive and interesting places where people want to be. Together, we will create and maintain high quality neighborhoods, places and spaces.*

As you drive through the core of our downtown, you will notice many historic and unique buildings and in 2015, the Downtown Facade Improvement Grant Program was created with a budget of \$200,000 as a means to help protect, preserve and enhance the charm of our downtown commercial area, including these historic gems.

To be eligible to apply, buildings must be commercial properties located within the Business Improvement Area (BIA) and the project proposal must meet all code requirements with no current code violations. Grants are awarded based on a point system and applicants apply under two categories: projects that are at, or under, \$5,000 and therefore would not require any matching funds or in-kind contributions by the business or property owner; and what is considered "graduated matching." These projects are operated under a graduated scale; as the budget increases so must the matching contribution increase by the business or property owner in the form of a loan, cash or in-kind contributions.

According to Mayor Backus, who proposed the program, "With all of the great investments and redevelopment occurring by private developers in our downtown core, we wanted to make sure that we also provided special attention to retaining the history and charm of what makes downtown Auburn so special—a traditional, pedestrian friendly Main Street comprised primarily of independently owned small businesses. Façade improvement grants can help our local small businesses and property owners by providing a little bit of money to apply a fresh coat of paint, replace a torn awning, restore traditional storefront windows and doors, and so much more. A collection of these types of small scale enhancements improve the feel and appearance of our downtown core."

One project that applied for, and received, funding under the graduated matching criteria was the historic Masonic Temple located at the corner of East Main Street and Auburn Way S. This building, as described in the registration form for the National Register of Historic Places, "is a two-story building situated at

the eastern edge of the original business district of downtown Auburn, Washington. Clad with white glazed terracotta on its street facades, the building was completed in 1924 in a restrained Italian Renaissance Revival style by the notable architecture firm Heath, Gove, and Bell." If that description is not enough to make you want to know more about the history and significance of this building, it is worth noting that the architecture firm of Heath, Gove and Bell designed some of the finest buildings in Washington history, including Paradise Inn at Mt Rainier and Stadium High School in Tacoma. This is a good indication of the prominence of the local Masonic Lodge, the confidence in the economy of this area and a very progressive vision for Auburn's future growth and development.

We located a quote from Brother T.W. Kelly, the original contractor for the building, and member of King Solomon #60 who wrote, "I have striven, in my capacity as general superintendent and over seer of all the work, to insure that only the best of workmanship and the finest of material available shall go into the structure, which shall stand for many years to come as a monument to the stability and loyalty of all who participated in its making." The note was dated August 1, 1924.

Research into the history of the Masonic fraternity reveals significant growth during the 1800s and into the early 1900s. During this particular time period, the government did not provide social safety nets for citizens. According to the Masonic Service Association of North America, the Masons pride themselves on a tradition of caring for widows and orphans, providing homes for those of advanced age and oftentimes were the only ones to provide a sense of security for some of the most vulnerable members of the communities where they were established. To this day, the Masons continue this tradition of giving to the tune of \$1.5 million each day in support of children's hospitals, funding medical research, supporting local community services and providing long-term care to their members and families.

This building was built specifically for King Solomon Lodge #60, the second fraternal order in the City of Auburn. This particular chapter of the Masons also experienced significant growth in the early 1900s as Auburn's population grew and the Lodge felt strongly that they needed to establish a place of their own in our community. Up to this point, they had hosted their meetings at various rental halls in the area. The organization had owned a

vacant site at an alternate location, however, the members of the building committee felt strongly that their presence needed to be on Main Street. One of its own members, Brother Aaron Neely Sr. and his wife Sarah, donated the land where the building now sits. With the location now established and the land provided debt-free, the project was ready to begin in September of 1923. The project was completed just over a year later, with a grand opening celebration on October 1, 1924. It is important to note that this building remains one of the few pre-war Masonic Halls in the South Sound and continues to be owned and operated by the Freemasons to this day.

Socially, this building was considered "the place to be" during its prime and often times the hall would be filled to capacity. In addition to the Masonic meetings being held here, it also hosted many social events and became the primary gathering space for the greater community. There are even reports of fighting amongst the various groups who wanted to rent the limited

meeting space. Over its 93 year history, several commercial tenants have also operated their businesses from the main level storefronts including a bank, a beauty shop, real estate offices, a military recruiting office, an insurance agency and today, a martial arts school. Of particular interest to some might be the longest lasting tenant, The Lemar Mortuary, which operated out of the building's basement for many years.

The building has undergone frequent remodels in an effort to accommodate its various tenants, with the most significant change occurring in the 1950s when the original storefronts were demolished and replaced with a design that was considered trendy for the time. However, that decision significantly changed the overall look and

feel of the original design. Additionally, despite its superior engineering and beautiful architectural ornamentation, time and the elements have weathered the building and it was in need of some TLC. Enter Chad Lester, a Mason, a member of the board of trustees for the temple, a real estate investor and owner operator of a design-build firm who was tasked with the restoration project.

In speaking with Chad, it is evident that he is passionate about quality construction, the fraternal order of the Masons, the history of the organization and the preservation of this historic landmark in the City of Auburn. "The current board of trustees had mandated that the building was in need of restoration. It was decided that the storefronts needed to be



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returned to the original appearance that the architects had envisioned; a design we feel is more timeless and restores the character of the building,” wrote Chad of the project. But how would it be possible? An undertaking of this magnitude, in order to be done properly and conform to current city codes, seemed a monumental undertaking. And that is where the partnership with the City of Auburn became so instrumental in making this possible. With funding from the façade improvement program, as well as funding from a grant from 4Culture’s Landmark Capital Improvement Program and with guidance from the staff in the City’s Planning and Development Department, the transformation began.

In order for the project to be done right, the Masons set out to secure a contractor who not only could do the work, but had a firm understanding of the original vision of the architects. A proposal was received from Kevin and Aaron Gent of Gentry Custom Remodel, a fourth generation remodeling firm. Kevin knows much about the intent of the design and architectural flavor of Frederick Heath of Heath, Gove and Bell as he, and his son Aaron, have had the opportunity to restore several of the architect’s many historic projects in the South Sound area. Kevin felt that having the opportunity to work on each and every one of those previous projects had given him the proper insight into this design, and provided a strong foundation on which to restore this building to its original state of grandeur.

After a successful grant application process, permits were obtained and deconstruction began. The metal canopies and plywood siding of the 1950s and 1960s were removed and the installation of the originally designed wood-trimmed storefronts began, first on the west side of the building that is now home to

a church and then the north side, which it is hoped will be the home of a future commercial tenant. In an additional effort to preserve the history of the building, Kevin was able to complete parts of the project by using reclaimed wood. Some of the original beams from the building itself were used, whose growth rings suggest that the wood may have come from trees that date back to the time of Columbus! During a recent tour of the project Kevin said, “The one aspect of this project that really sets it apart from most is the level of old world craftsmanship. Much of this job had to be milled by hand, using tools and techniques that are as old as the building. Things like hand drawn bead details, and dowelled joinery are long since forgotten techniques. We are thrilled to breathe new life into them today.”

Additional façade improvements include the restoration of the brick wall through a process known as “tuck-pointing,” where the old mortar is removed and replaced with fresh mortar. This is done in an effort to repair and restore the old, weathered joints of a brick façade and help to ensure this beautiful structure remains standing for an additional 90+ years.

It is estimated that the final cost of restoration will be somewhere in the \$300,000 range, and according to Chad, was made possible in large part thanks to the generous support of the City of Auburn’s façade improvement program and 4Culture. We hope you will make it a point to stop and admire this phenomenal project. We think you will agree this was a very worthy recipient. An investment that not only promotes the future economic development of our city, but also preserves the character and charm of our past. To learn more about the façade improvement program, and the downtown redevelopment, visit our website at www.auburnwa.gov/doing_business/community_development/development/downtown_redev.htm.