



## Historic Site Preservation Board Staff Report

Date: April 13, 2010

Case No.: HSPB – 33, Amendment; City Hall

Application Type: Amendment to Historic Designation

Location: 3200 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way

Applicant: Historic Site Preservation Board

Property Owner: City of Palm Springs

Zone: C. C. (Civic Center District)

General Plan: Public / Quasi-Public

APN: 502-150-005

From: Craig A. Ewing, AICP, Director of Planning Services

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### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

An application by the City of Palm Springs Historic Site Preservation Board (HSPB) to amend the existing historic designation of the Palm Springs City Hall at 3200 E. Tahquitz Canyon Way. The proposed amendment would expand the existing designation to include landscape and parking areas. Such amended designation would:

1. Place the entire property under the guidance of Municipal Code Section 8.05
2. Require the City to maintain the buildings consistent with that ordinance,

### **RECOMMENDATION**

That the Historic Site Preservation Board (HSPB) recommends approval to the City Council amending the historic designation of the City Hall to include the site's landscape and parking areas. A draft resolution is attached for consideration.

## PRIOR ACTIONS

- On September 10, 1996, the Historic Site Preservation Board (HSPB) conducted a public hearing unanimously recommended to the City Council designation of the Palm Springs City Hall as a Historic Site, Class 1.
- On October 2, 1996, the City Council conducted a public hearing and unanimously approved the Palm Springs City Hall as a Historic Site, Class 1. The Council resolution included the following language:

*"Section 4. No permits for the exterior alteration to the...Palm Springs City Hall...shall be granted without prior approval of the Historic Site Preservation Board and / or the City Council, pursuant to Chapter 8.05 of the Palm Springs Municipal Code; approved alterations shall maintain the historic architectural integrity of the building."*

- On March 9, 2010, the Historic Site Preservation Board initiated an amendment to the approved historic designation of the Palm Springs City Hall to expand the designation to include the site's landscape and parking area. The HSPB also adopted a 120-day Stay of Demolition on the landscape and parking areas.

## BACKGROUND AND SETTING

### Definition of an Historic Site.

Section 8.05.020 of the Municipal Code provides the definition of an historic site as follows;

(a) *Historic Site.*

*An historic site is any real property such as: a building; a structure, including but not limited to archways, tiled areas and similar architectural elements; an archaeological excavation or object that is unique or significant because of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship or aesthetic effect and:*

- 1. That is associated with events that have made a meaningful contribution to the nation, state or community; or*
- 2. That is associated with lives of persons who made meaningful contribution to national, state or local history; or*
- 3. That reflects or exemplifies a particular period of the national, state or local history; or*
- 4. That embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or*
- 5. That presents the work of a master builder, designer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age; or that possesses high artistic value; or*
- 6. That represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or*
- 7. That has yielded or may be likely to yield information important to national, state or local history or prehistory.*

A Class 1 Historic Site may also qualify for historic designation at the federal, state and/or county level.

#### Designation of Historic Sites.

The City Council is authorized to designate Historic Sites.

The Historic Site Preservation Board makes recommendations to the City Council that certain sites be designated as Historic Sites in accordance with Section 8.05.135 of the Municipal Code. The Board may initiate studies, surveys and investigations it deems necessary to adequately gather information in consideration of a recommendation.

#### Conditions that apply to Class 1 Historic Sites.

According to Section 8.05 of the Municipal Code, the following shall apply to a Class 1 Historic Site;

1. It shall meet the definition of an historic site as outlined in Municipal Code Section 8.05.020.
2. An archival file shall be maintained on the property by the City.
3. It may be qualified as 'historic' at the federal, state, and/or county level.
4. The structure/site may not be modified nor objects removed without the approval of the City Council.
5. The use may be limited by the City Council to the extent that it may impair the integrity of the site.
6. A plaque explaining the historic nature of the site will be installed at the site.
7. Compliance with all rules and regulations for Historic Sites and Historic Districts under Article IV of Chapter 8.05 of the Municipal Code shall be required.

#### **DESCRIPTION**

The Palm Spring City Hall was construction in the 1950's (with subsequent additions) during the mid-century modern architectural wave that swept through the desert at that time. Among the best-known architects of that era, Albert Frey with then-partners John Porter Clark and Robson C. Chambers undertook the design of the City's government center. The architectural features and merits of the building are described below.

The site is located at the northwest corner of the eastern terminus Tahquitz Canyon Way at El Cielo Road. City Hall, the Police and County government buildings to the south and the Palm Springs International Airport to the east define this part of the City as the community's government center. Certain common features define all these facilities, including low-rise buildings, significant street setbacks, parking lots in front of the buildings and predominantly low landscaping, usually in the form of lawns.

In the October 2, 1996 staff report to the City Council, the Palm Springs City Hall was included with several other Albert Frey structures as recommended for designation as historic sites, Class 1. The report cited Joseph Rosa's, Albert Frey, Architect (1990; Rizzoli International Publications, Inc.) for much of the information used to analyze the property's architectural and historic importance:

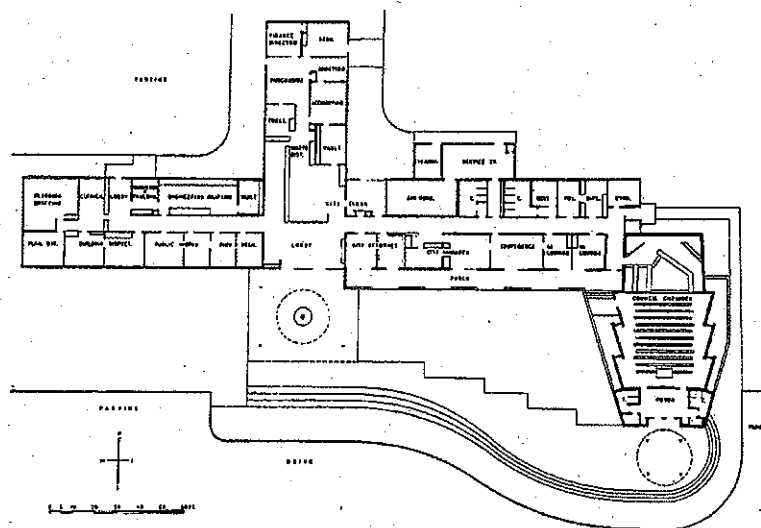
*"When Frey returned from a trip around the world at the end of 1955, he completed the final scheme for one of his most important public buildings, the Palm Springs City Hall (1952-57). While traveling, Frey's interest in the relationship between pure form and function was renewed, and this interest is reflected in the City Hall by the creation of a separate volume for the Council chamber. The main volume of the building is linear and symmetrical, with a wing extending from the rear of the main entrance. To the right is the Council Chamber, which is higher than the rest of the building, as function requirements of the public assembly hall were used to shape the space. All of its perimeter exterior walls are stepped to improve the acoustics and to bring in north light. The entrance to the council Chamber is more elaborate than the main entrance. A sign above it states "The People Are The City," and it is marked by a poured concrete disc held up by four columns. The disc corresponds to the void left by a circle removed from the rectangular metal plan that marks the main entry. The building is construction of concrete blocks in which every two rows are aligned in relation to each other, thereby creating a pattern of squares in elevation. (The original structure was designed in collaboration with E. Steward Williams, AIA, and additions (Emergency Operation Center in 1964, New Conference Rooms in 1972 & Community Development Wing in 1984, designed by Mr. Williams, have been made over the years.)*

No specific mention is made of the building's relationship to the site or site conditions (lot size, shape, setbacks, etc.) nor is there a discussion of the design of the parking lot and landscape areas. The record is silent regarding any design or historic significance associated with the grounds of the City Hall complex.

## ANALYSIS

In Mr. Rosa's book, a site plan for City Hall is reproduced, but only the cement plinth in front of the building is included:

1957

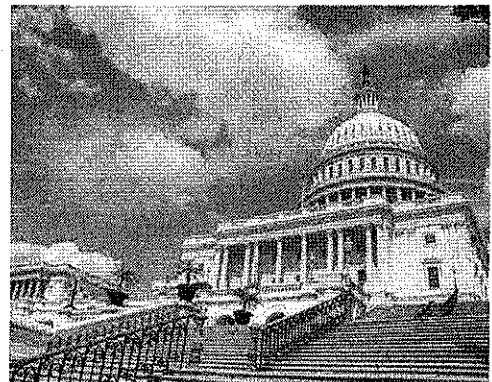
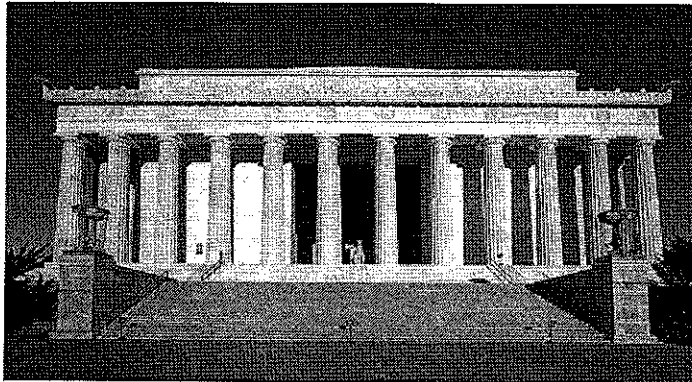


PALM SPRINGS CITY HALL, PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

Based on the record, there does not appear to be any acknowledged architectural or historic significance to either the parking lots or landscape areas surrounding the building.

Staff notes that absent any specific information, it may still be possible to ascribe significance based on site conditions and features. Public comment has been received to suggest that the parking lot's layout provides certain unobstructed views of the City Hall building from Tahquitz Canyon Way. According to this argument, any revision that would allow cars to park where they are currently not parking would inhibit the views of the historic building. There is some merit to this argument if there can be found historic significance to the open views of the site.

One example of such significance can be found in how the building is set on its base. The low-rise building that reflects the mid-century modern ethic includes the concrete base – or “plinth” – that has long been a characteristic of important buildings. Government buildings, churches, banks were classically placed on massive foundations that included a long series of steps from the ground level to the entry:



The low-rise nature of Palm Springs City Hall compressed the plinth to a flat concrete base with only a few steps:

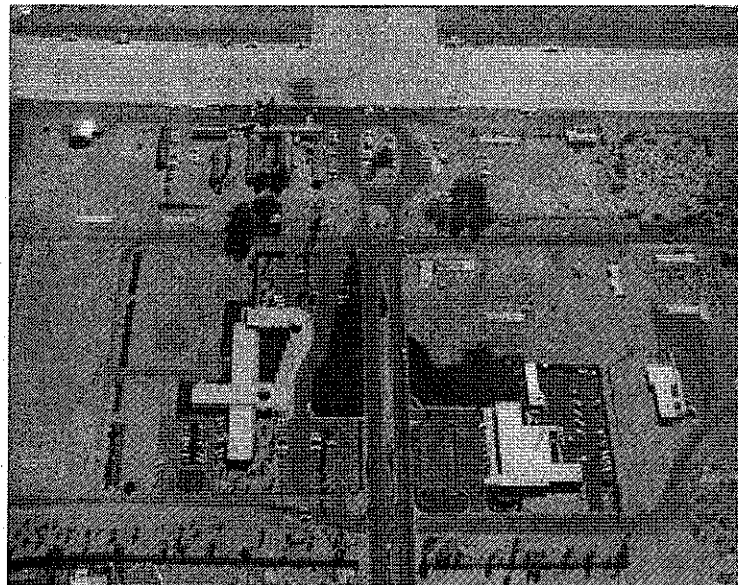




This concrete element is not protected by the current designation, but is an important element in setting the scale of the building within the meaning of a government facility.

Whether it is important to view the building and base from off-site is a separate issue. Government buildings are often located and designed to be prominently viewed from surrounding areas. It is more difficult to achieve such prominence with a low-rise building on a flat lot; however, the placement of parking to the sides of the main City Hall entries, as well as the use of an unadorned lawn provides an open view of the building from the street. Staff recognizes these elements as design choices, but it is not clear whether they rise to the level of "historic".

During the time of the building's initial construction, the development of the Tahquitz / El Cielo area was generally devoid of significant landscape or other features and the buildings sat in a fairly open and unobstructed landscape:



However, other features were soon introduced, including a fountain at the airport, statuary on several sites and trees throughout the area, which combined to interrupt the originally unimpeded views. Consequently, it does not appear that the City ever considered the open and visible look of City Hall or other public buildings to be of singular importance. Monuments, decorative elements and trees were included among the low-rise buildings; these created a more complicated setting and demonstrated that more than views of the building were important to the community.

## REQUIRED FINDINGS

As noted above in Background and Setting, Section 8.05.020 of the Municipal Code provides the definition of an historic site: "*An historic site is any real property such as: a building; a structure, including but not limited to archways, tiled areas and similar architectural elements; an archaeological excavation or object that is unique or significant because of its location, design, setting, materials, workmanship or aesthetic effect*". Seven other qualities are listed therein:

- (1) That is associated with events that have made a meaningful contribution to the nation, state or community; or
- (2) That is associated with lives of persons who made meaningful contribution to national, state or local history; or
- (3) That reflects or exemplifies a particular period of the national, state or local history; or
- (4) That embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction; or
- (5) That presents the work of a master builder, designer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age; or that possesses high artistic value; or
- (6) That represents a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or
- (7) That has yielded or may be likely to yield information important to national, state or local history or prehistory.

In review of the records and photographs, staff believes that several of the findings can be made to extend the historic designation to include the concrete steps and walkway in front of the building. This plinth element embodies the distinctive characteristics of the mid-century modern style, as applied to a public building (finding no. 4) and appears to be part of Albert Frey's design plan for the property (finding no. 5).

While the landscaping and parking lot are also part of the original design, it is not clear from the record that they represent part of the deliberate or historic design scheme of the City Hall building. Further, staff does not recommend extending historic designation for the parking lot and landscaping on the basis of that protecting views from off site does not appear to be a historic element of the site.

## RECOMMENDATION

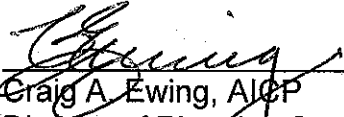
Based on the above analysis, staff recommends that the Board recommend to City Council the amendment of the Class 1 historic designation for the Palm Springs City Hall to include the concrete steps and entry plaza in front of the main entrance and Council Chambers.

## ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

In accordance with Section 15331 (Historical Resources Restoration/Rehabilitation) of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the proposed amendment is categorically exempt from environmental review as the proposed designation meets the conditions outlined for preservation of a historic resource.

## NOTIFICATION

Pursuant to section 8.05.140 of the Municipal Code of Palm Springs, All property owners within four hundred (400) feet of the subject property have been notified and notice was made in a newspaper of general circulation.

  
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Craig A. Ewing, AICP  
Director of Planning Services

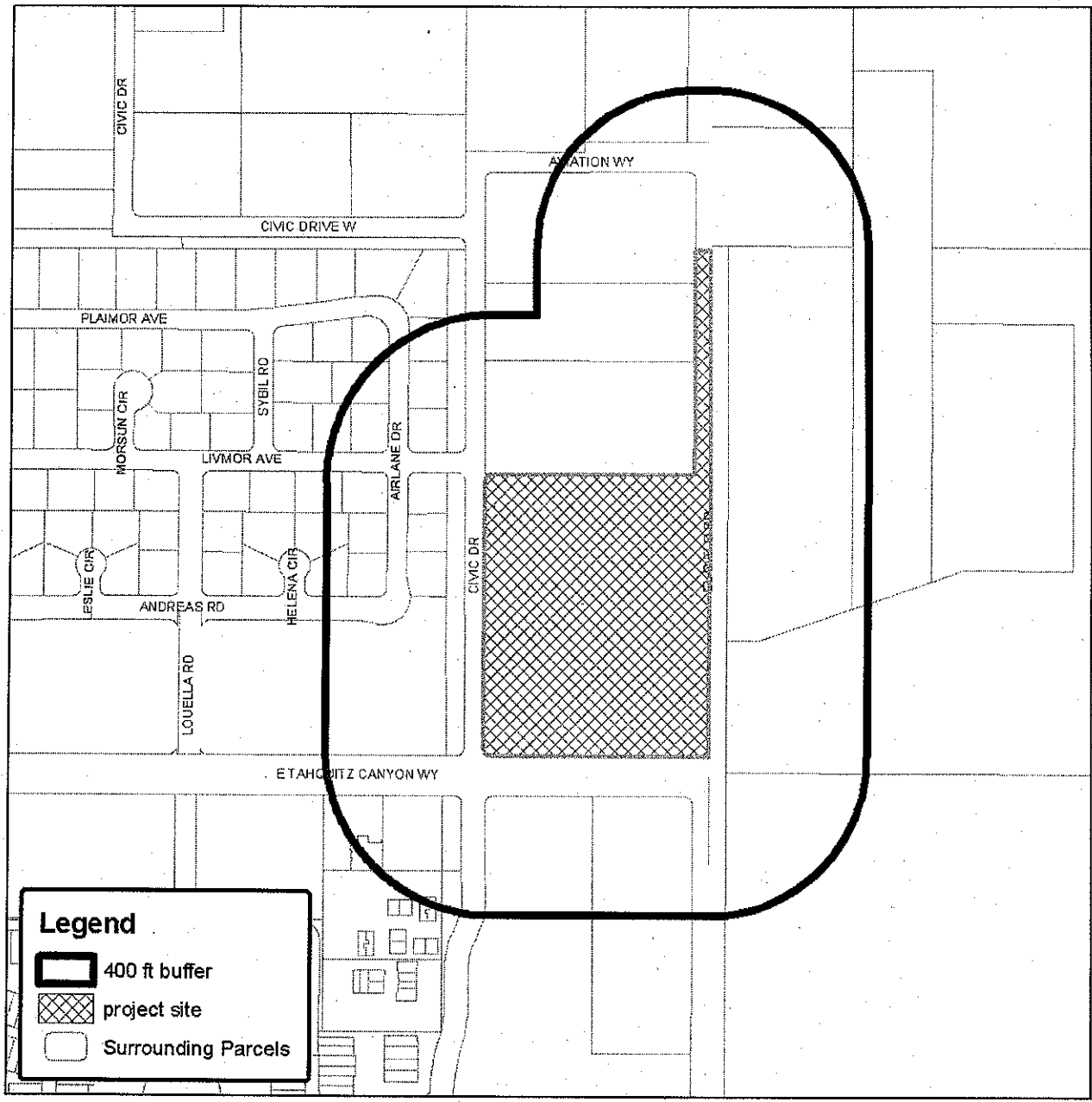
## ATTACHMENTS

1. Vicinity Map
2. Draft Resolution





# Department of Planning Services Vicinity Map



**Legend**

- 400 ft buffer
- project site
- Surrounding Parcels

## CITY OF PALM SPRINGS

**CASE NO:** HSPB - 33

**APPLICANT:** City of Palm Springs  
Historic Site Preservation Board

**DESCRIPTION:** Amend the Palm Springs City Hall Class 1 Historic designation (Case No. HSPB 33) to include the City Hall site including landscape and parking areas.

RESOLUTION NO. 33-A

OF THE HISTORIC SITE PRESERVATION BOARD  
OF THE CITY OF PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA,  
RECOMMENDING THAT THE CITY COUNCIL  
AMEND THE EXISTING HISTORIC CLASS 1  
DESIGNATION FOR PALM SPRINGS CITY HALL,  
3200 EAST TAHQUITZ CANYON WAY, TO INCLUDE  
THE CONCRETE STEPS AND PLAZA AREA IN  
FRONT OF THE MAIN (SOUTH) ELEVATION

WHEREAS, Chapter 8.05 of the Palm Springs Municipal Code allows for the designation of historic sites; and

WHEREAS, ON October 2, 1996, the City Council adopted Resolution No. 18907 adopting a historic designation, Class 1 for the Palm Springs City Hall building, but excluding the site and grounds; and

WHEREAS, on February 9, 2010, the Historic Site Preservation Board, by a vote of 7 to 0, initiated an application to amend the existing historic designation of the Palm Springs City Hall to consider including the site; and

WHEREAS, notice of a public hearing of the Historic Site Preservation Board of the City of Palm Springs to consider designation of the Palm Springs International Airport's west façade a Class 1 historic site was issued in accordance with applicable law; and

WHEREAS, on April 13, 2010, the Historic Site Preservation Board conducted a public hearing in accordance with applicable law to consider amending the existing Class 1 historic designation of the Palm Springs City Hall; and

WHEREAS, the designation of the steps and plaza fronting the Palm Springs City Hall shall further the purpose and intent of Chapter 8.05; and

WHEREAS, the designation of the steps and plaza fronting the Palm Springs City Hall shall promote the sensitive preservation of said site; and

WHEREAS, the Historic Site Preservation Board has carefully reviewed and considered all of the evidence in connection with the designation, including but not limited to the staff report, application and historical research, all written and oral testimony presented, and notes the following:

1. The steps and plaza fronting the main (south) entries of the Palm Springs City Hall provide an important element in setting the scale of the building within the meaning of a government facility .
2. The steps and plaza appear to be part of the original plan of the Albert Frey design of the City Hall.

THE HISTORIC SITE PRESERVATION BOARD HEREBY FINDS AS FOLLOWS:

Section 1: That the concrete area in front of the main entries to the Palm Springs City Hall embodies the distinctive characteristics of a type, period or method of construction, because the steps and plaza, as a base or "plinth", reconcile the distinctive characteristics of the mid-century modern style with the traditional design of a public building

Section 2: That the concrete area in front of the main entries to the Palm Springs City Hall presents the work of a master builder, designer, artist, or architect whose individual genius influenced his age; because the steps and plaza appear to be part of Albert Frey's design plan for the property; the life and work of Albert Frey has been well-documented; and his work is recognized world-wide as significant toward the development of the modern movements of architecture, especially as he adapted such styles and movements to the local environment.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that, based upon the foregoing, the Historic Site Preservation Board recommends that the City Council amend the Class 1 historic designation for the Palm Springs City Hall to include the concrete steps and plaza in front of the main (south) entries of the building, subject to the following conditions;

1. All future exterior modifications including but not limited to building, site, landscaping, lighting, walls, and fences shall require Architectural Approval pursuant to Section 94.04.00 of the Palm Springs Zoning Ordinance.
2. No permit for the alteration of the building exterior or the steps or entry plaza fronting the main (south) building entries, including any and all of the defining elements and characteristics shall be issued without prior approval by the Historic Site Preservation Board.
3. That the City Clerk submit the Council Resolution to the County recorder for recordation within 90 days of the effective date of this resolution.
4. All existing or previously approved alterations shall be considered acceptable.

ADOPTED this 13th day of April, 2010.

AYES:

NOES:  
ABSENT:  
ABSTENTIONS:

ATTEST:

CITY OF PALM SPRINGS, CALIFORNIA

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Craig A. Ewing, AICP  
Director of Planning Services