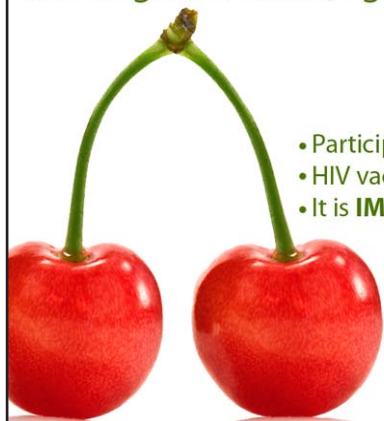


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PRESERVATION | BY TIM LOUIS MACALUSO

Closing the door on vinyl windows



Caitlin Meives (left) and Cynthia Howk of the Landmark Society examine the restored wood windows at the Campbell-Whittlesey House. The building seen through the window is the Hoyt Potter House, home of the society's offices. PHOTO BY MATT DETURCK

It's not unusual in neighborhoods throughout the city to see older wood windows stacked at the curb. Rather than restore the windows, property owners usually replace them, often with vinyl windows. Rochester is now among cities and towns across the country reviewing its ordinance regarding vinyl replacement windows. It's a hot topic among preservationists that is attracting broader public attention.

The city's Preservation Board is considering developing a set of window-related guidelines to its ordinance regarding the approval of certificates of appropriateness. Owners of city-designated landmarks or properties located in a city preservation district are required to obtain a CofA before almost any exterior change is made. There is a \$100 application fee for the CofA.

The ordinance would continue to apply only to city-designated landmarks and preservation district properties, but the new guidelines would deter the use of vinyl replacement windows. And board members would offer alternatives to vinyl.

The change would be significant. While it would impact a relatively small and distinct group of properties, Rochester's approach is being closely watched by communities around the state. And the Preservation Board is considering a series of additional guidelines to apply to things such as landscapes.

But at a meeting last week, Preservation Board members seemed far from reaching a consensus on what the new windows guidelines should say. Some members said they were worried about approving a set of guidelines that are too rigid because the controversy over vinyl windows is complicated and multifaceted.

But Peter Siegrist, the city's preservation planner, says the guidelines should be as explicit as possible. Something with a lot of exceptions, he says, will just bog down the approval process and create confusion.

"There's going to be a tremendous public outcry if that happens," he says. "We've got to be clear."

Siegrist will prepare in the next few weeks a draft of the guidelines for board members to review.

Many of the city's buildings — residential and commercial — are older and have windows that need attention. Vinyl replacement windows are popular because they are relatively cheap and easy to install.

Educating consumers about the value of restoring older wood windows is important, says Cynthia Howk, architectural research coordinator for the Landmark Society of Western New York. While the city's CofA ordinance doesn't apply to all property owners, she says, everyone should know their options.

"Windows are a major and significant feature of any building," Howk says. "There's no question that replacing older wood windows with vinyl windows greatly diminishes the character of an older property."

Restoring older windows can also increase property values, she says.

The Landmark Society has been guiding the Preservation Board on a window policy. The Society strongly opposes the use of vinyl replacement windows.

But many property owners are intimidated by the necessary repairs and upkeep of older windows. The work can be difficult, time-intensive, and require the help

of an experienced window repair person, said John Schick, architect and Preservation Board member, at last week's meeting.

And finding a knowledgeable craftsman to do the work can be problematic, he said.

Highly qualified restoration people do exist in the Rochester area, Howk says, but they aren't well-known. And their work takes time, she says, and may seem costly compared to installing a vinyl window.

Getting consumers to think about the long-term investment they're making might ease some of their worries, Howk says.

"We're talking about the difference between a wood sash — the part of the window that holds the glass — which has provided decades of service, compared to vinyl windows that may not even last a decade," she says.

But many property owners see heavily painted windows that won't open or close, Howk says, and they incorrectly assume that the windows can't be restored.

Vinyl replacement windows can seem like a low-cost solution, she says, but durability isn't assured. Many vinyl window products are designed to last about 20 years, Howk says, but often begin to deteriorate sooner. And unlike wood windows which are made with replaceable parts, when a vinyl window breaks, the whole window usually needs to be replaced.

Even newer wood replacement windows are often constructed with softer, less durable lumber, Howk says, while the wood used in historic windows is much harder. That wood is usually from old growth forests, she says, and with proper care, Howk says, the windows can last indefinitely.

But discouraging the use of vinyl replacement windows is not just a matter of protecting the aesthetics of older properties. There are serious environmental and economic considerations, too.

Fossil fuels are a key component in vinyl windows. And the old wood windows are typically sent to landfills if they aren't reused.

Energy-saving claims are a major selling point for vinyl window retailers and contractors, but a local expert says those claims are often skewed.

"Yeah, typically a new window will perform better than an old leaky window," says Steve Jordan, a local historic preservation consultant. "But you can take an old window, weather strip it, clean it up, and put a storm window on it, and it will perform just as well and sometimes better than a new window."

Jordan says he doesn't want to indict the whole window industry, because "a lot of

companies make a good quality replacement window, but frequently they're not ones people usually buy."

Lead-contaminated paint is another concern for property owners, says Caitlin Meives, preservation planner with the Landmark Society. Vinyl windows are often promoted as a quick solution, she says, but it's a bit of a false reassurance. Much of the contaminated paint remains after the replacement window is installed, she says. And the wood window with lead paint is usually dumped and contaminates another site.

"We're asking people to take a step back and take a deep breath, because there are proper abatement options available," Meives says.

But consumer confusion about vinyl replacement windows compared to restoration of historic wood windows is understandable. State and federal incentives through tax credits, grants, and low-interest loans seem to send property owners different messages. Tax credits and other incentives are offered to property owners who replace old windows with energy-saving vinyl windows.

There are similar incentives that can be used to restore old wood windows, but it takes a little research to find them. If people fail to take advantage of the incentives, Siegrist says, the government will discontinue the programs, which is why consumer education is important.

Owners of large commercial properties may pose the biggest challenge for the Preservation Board.

An older single-family home, depending on its size, may have 30 to 50 windows.

But a large apartment building in one of the city's preservation districts may have 500 or more wood windows, and restoration would require a formidable investment.

"I would tell them that they usually have to paint and clean carpets when a tenant moves out," says consultant Jordan. "That's a good time to repair the windows in that unit. And it makes the costs much more manageable."

Still, some Preservation Board members are concerned about creating restrictive guidelines, especially during a difficult economy. What difference would it make, one board member asked, if a vinyl window is used in the back of a building facing a parking lot?

But Howk says taking shortcuts is not the answer.

"Once those wood windows have been removed, they're probably lost forever," she says.

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