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Thursday, May 08, 2003

## Local News

Posted on Tue, May. 14, 2002

*The Mercury News*

### Revision seen for historic housing law

**PICK AN AGE OR PICK AN AREA, ONE CRITIC URGES**

By Joshua L. Kwan  
Mercury News

Bert Sutherland wasn't pleased when the city of Mountain View hurriedly placed his home, a Craftsman built in 1908, on a register of historic buildings without his consent.

Being on the list means Sutherland and the owners of the 94 buildings deemed historic must now seek city approval before making significant repairs or renovations. Until a group of angry homeowners complained, the city was set to require homeowners to pay hundreds of dollars in permit fees for major home projects.

To Sutherland, a retired director of Sun Microsystems' research lab, the city applied an arbitrary and discriminatory hand in selecting which homes to place in its register.

The city views the ordinance as a stopgap until it can thoroughly study how best to preserve its historic buildings. The action was spurred when a home built by a well-known grocer at the turn of the century was about to be razed last year for a new development.

City planners spent several months drafting an interim ordinance that takes effect for two years, giving officials some time to study how best to preserve and celebrate Mountain View's oldest and most meaningful structures.

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The city council in April unanimously passed an emergency two-year ordinance to preserve a slew of old homes.

When he looks at his neighbors' homes on his quiet, leafy street near downtown Mountain View, Sutherland says it seems like the city randomly picked some old homes and labeled them ``historic."

To test his theory, Sutherland enlisted the help of his stepdaughter Nancy Stuhr, a Caldwell Banker real estate agent with 13 years of experience selling homes in the Old Mountain View neighborhood.

On the 300 block of View Street, where Sutherland purchased his home 10 years ago, there are nine single-family homes. Stuhr searched Metro Scan, a database widely used by real estate agents to assess property values, and found that eight of those homes were built in 1925 or earlier, but only four of those are on the city's register.

``If the purpose of the ordinance is to preserve the historical ambience of the city," Sutherland said, ``then the entire neighborhood should be roped off."

``The only way that I can see to do it, if you want to preserve the historical ambience, then you've got to pick an age or pick an area," Sutherland added. Any house built before World War I, he suggested, or the entire 300 block of View Street.

Sutherland's home was built by a butcher, George Swall, who became a banker and served on the first town council in the city's history.

When Councilwoman Rosemary Stasek voiced her support of the ordinance, she said it would be a starting point for city staff members to begin work on a long-term plan. The important thing, she said, was to get a law on the books immediately to prevent the destruction of historic homes.

Without an established procedure for labeling a building ``historic," the city decided to compile the index of buildings in two walking-tour books, a 1979 report on the city's architectural heritage and a document titled the ``Historic

## Resources List."

Sutherland questions the sources, calling them ``the whims of an author of a downtown walking guide and other historical books of some kind."

``How the author chose to put those houses in it, I don't know," he said.

Michael Percy, a city planner who helped put together the report two decades ago on the city's architectural heritage, said it was researched largely by passionate volunteers.

``There was an interest in the community in documenting the pure examples of various architectural histories within Mountain View," he said.

Next step: The city will probably wait one year and evaluate the positives and negatives of the interim ordinance, Percy said, before submitting any changes to the city council. The council then might adopt a permanent ordinance.

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