



**REPORT TO THE HISTORIC  
PRESERVATION COMMISSION**

AGENDA ITEM NO. VIA  
HPC MEETING: 09/28/09

September 28, 2009

FROM: KEITH BERGTHOLD, Assistant Director  
Planning and Development Department

APPROVED BY

DEPARTMENT DIRECTOR

THROUGH: DARRELL UNRUH, Planning Manager  
Secretary, Historic Preservation Commission

BY: KARANA HATTERSLEY-DRAYTON  
Historic Preservation Project Manager

SUBJECT: Review and Make Findings on a Formal Application for a Wilson Island  
Historic District (Council District 01) Pursuant to FMC 12-1610c.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Staff recommends that the Historic Preservation Commission review the attached Historic Property Survey Report and Local Historic District Nomination for the Wilson Island and hold a public hearing. The Commission should consider whether the formal application is complete and consistent with the requirements for a historic district pursuant to Section 12-1610 of the Fresno Municipal Code. Staff recommends that the Commission find that the 6-block Wilson Island meets the requirements for a Local Historic District under Criteria i, ii, iii and iv of Section 12-1607(b) of the Historic Preservation Ordinance. The Commission's recommendation for a nomination to the Local Register will be forwarded to the City Council for consideration as provided by the Historic Preservation Ordinance. The potential District has been publicly noticed in the *Fresno Bee* and a letter which included information about the options for design review for the proposed District was sent to all property owners as required by the City's Historic Preservation Ordinance.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In June 2004 several residents of the 6-block Tower District neighborhood known as the "Wilson Island" met with City staff to propose a historic district. Boundaries for the proposed historic district include the six blocks bounded by N. Echo Avenue on the west, East Carmen Avenue on the north, the northern side of East Floradora Avenue on the south and the back side of the commercial lots along North Wishon Avenue on the east. An initial application for the District was prepared and approved by the Historic Preservation Commission at a public hearing on July 26, 2004. Staff met with the property owners on August 6 and September 24, 2004 and over the next year a neighborhood committee collected signatures on consent forms from 80% of the property owners. Most recently, staff and the Commission Chair met with property owners on September 5, 2009. Staff with support from the Wilson Island committee (in particular Dr. Jeannine Raymond) has now documented all the properties within the proposed district. Of the 80 single and multi-family residences, 78 appear to be contributors to the proposed Wilson Island Historic District.

**BACKGROUND**

The "Wilson Island" is located within Fresno's Tower District and encompasses 80 properties which are within the larger Wilson's North Fresno Tract, a subdivision first developed in 1908 by Rosanna C. Wilson and her son A. Polette Wilson. The name "Wilson Island" is a local (emic) term which refers to the initial plan for the neighborhood. Although Wishon and Echo now connect to

McKinley both streets once were designed to dead-end at Carmen Avenue, thus forming a backwards P shape, or "island." The District boundaries are concurrent with the residential buildings within this "P" and the neighborhood's long-term identity.

The Wilson Island is one of the most architecturally distinct neighborhoods in Fresno, with a mix representing the major styles prevalent during the period of 1910-1954. Several of the homes were designed by prominent local and regional architects (and/or building firms) including Charles E. Butner, William D. Coates, Richard F. Felchlin, Swartz and Ryland, Taylor-Wheeler Builders, Manoog Manoogian, etc. A few architects also lived in "The Island," although it is of interest that their homes are among the more modest. The intellectual elite of Fresno relocated to this neighborhood, and their access to Fresno's downtown business district was made easier by the extension of the street car line in 1908. Property owners included William Blasingame and Lena Shaver, the widow of Charles Shaver for whom Shaver Lake is named; Olin Everts, attorney and political leader; Frank Bradford, owner of the Valley's largest baking company; banker Barton Einstein; and Milo Rowell, manager of the largest produce firm in the San Joaquin Valley; William Eilert, owner of the Fresno Brewery; Dr. Frank Twining, founder of Twining ("We Test Anything") Laboratories; Louis Gundelfinger, banker, etc. Of interest are the numbers of individual women who purchased and developed homes in the Island, encouraged perhaps by the tract developer, Rosanna C. Cooper. A sense of community was strengthened by the number of families with multiple homes in the neighborhood. From an earlier era when people lived in more economically mixed neighborhoods, the Wilson Island represents a move to a new "suburbia," based to some extent on social standing and education.

The District appears to be eligible for Fresno's Local Register of Historic Resources pursuant to FMC 12-1607(b) under Criteria i, ii, iii and iv. The District also appears to be eligible to the National Register of Historic Places although separate forms will be required for this nomination. The neighborhood has been "called out" as an area of architectural and historical note in both the Tower District Specific Plan of 1991 and Virginia and Lee McAlester's A Field Guide to America's Historic Neighborhoods and Museum Houses: The Western States (1998:47-48). Five homes are individually listed on the Local Register of Historic Resources and an additional property was recently designated as a heritage property. Of the 80 properties, all but two appear to be contributors to a Local Historic District.

- Attachments: Exhibit A - "Historic Property Survey Report and Local Historic District Nomination For the Wilson Island, Fresno, California," Prepared by Karana Hattersley-Drayton, and Dr. Jeannine Raymond, September 2009.  
Exhibit B - Section 12-1610 of the Fresno Municipal Code (Historic Preservation Ordinance).