

Chico finally gets serious about protecting its history

After 11 failed efforts by preservationists, City Council approves landmark program

By [Robert Speer](#)

John Gallardo was gleeful. Much to his delight, the Chico City Council had finally agreed—after decades of pushing and prodding from local historic-preservation advocates—to create an official historic-preservation program.

As Gallardo, the long-time president of the Chico Heritage Association, told the council Tuesday (June 17), he remembered back to the 1970s, when former Mayor Ted Meriam and Far West Heritage Association co-founder Hester Patrick, both now gone, “tried to get this started” in the first of 11 unsuccessful efforts over the years.

The new program will have a substantial impact. As city Senior Planner Bob Summerville explained, it will include a historic-preservation element in the city’s new general plan, creation of a historic-preservation ordinance, establishment of a historic-preservation commission (whose duties will be added to those of the Architectural Review Board), and adoption of an update to the city’s existing historic-resources inventory.

Chico resident Christina Aranguren encouraged the council to approve the plan, saying: “An ordinance that would protect the city’s historical projects is way overdue.”

And Debbie Villaseñor, representing the Barber Neighborhood Association, said her group was “very pleased” to see the program. “It’s really timely,” she said. “As the city is looking to the future with its new general plan, it’s appropriate to look to the past at the same time.”

Once the components of the historic-preservation program are established, Summerville said, the city will qualify to be a “certified local government,” or CLG. That will greatly improve its ability to compete for a variety of grants for further expansion of the program. It will also qualify the city for technical assistance, give it greater credibility with groups like the National Register and California Register of Historic Places, and provide economic benefits in the form of “increased property values and pride of place.”

Council consensus was clearly in favor of the program, and a motion to establish it passed unanimously.

In a related action, the council voted unanimously (and enthusiastically) to move forward on developing a memorandum of understanding with the Mechoopda Indian Tribe of Chico Rancheria establishing guiding principles for the city-tribe relationship. The council also directed staff to pursue grant funding sources for implementing the MOU, including preparation of a cultural-resources management plan.

The MOU expands upon the provisions of SB 18, which requires cities to consult with tribes whenever their actions might affect Indian artifacts, by requiring the Mechoopda be consulted whenever a general plan amendment might affect opens spaces in the city, Summerville explained.

Sandra Knight, the tribe's vice chairwoman, told the council the tribe was "very appreciative and grateful Chico has embraced SB 18 as it has," adding that many other cities haven't done so.

In other news, the council heard a report on air pollution from Jim Wagoner, air pollution control officer at the county Air Quality Management District, and Dr. Gary Incaudo, a local allergist and UC Davis professor of immunology, on Chico's problems with ozone and PM 2.5 pollution from wood smoke. (For details on the issue, see "[The growing danger of wood burning](#)," from March 20.)

Incaudo warned that, as he'd seen first-hand, Chico's pollution was having harmful health effects on residents, especially children and those with existing lung problems. "Kids are especially vulnerable," he said, "because their bodies are growing and they are active, which causes them to breathe more."

It's estimated that 14,000 to 24,000 Californians die prematurely each year because of air pollution—six times as many as die in traffic accidents, Incaudo said.

He had specific suggestions on ways the city could improve air quality. One was to improve traffic flow by timing signals (80 percent of the city's 97 lights aren't synchronized, he said) and eliminating unneeded stop signs (2,000 of the 3,500 could go, he said). The improvements could reduce vehicular pollution by as much as 22 percent, he said, plus save households as much as \$500 annually in gas costs.

The council referred the issue to its Internal Affairs Committee to come up with recommendations.

The council also took on the always-volatile issue of housing density, voting to approve a Planning Commission recommendation to increase the minimum density in R-2 zones (medium-density residential) from 5.5 units per acre to 7.01 units per acre. The maximum density would remain at 14 units per acre.

The immediate impact of the change would be minor, given that only 14 acres in the city are zoned R-2, but Councilman Larry Wahl was irate anyway. "This just takes away options for residents and increases the density in neighborhoods that don't need it," he charged. "It will help destroy the character of Chico. It's a travesty!"

Mayor Andy Holcombe said the change was necessary if the city was going to meet its housing needs in the future. "It sets the tone for the general plan to come," he said.

The council approved the proposal 5-1, with Wahl dissenting and Bertagna disqualified.