

TACOMA

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Article and Photo By Todd Matthews, Editor

It's been nearly 10 years since Reuben McKnight hung up his hiking boots and folded his maps for desk work at City Hall. In an earlier life, McKnight, 32, was a contract archaeologist sifting through former ranches, mining camps, and Native American settlements searching for traces of history in Oregon, Washington, and Idaho. But it hasn't taken long for McKnight, the City of Tacoma's historic preservation officer, to take the reins of the city's 30-year-old program.

"The interest level here in Tacoma history and historic preservation is incredibly high," says McKnight, who spoke with the Index last week. "It makes my job more fun. I very rarely talk to people who aren't aware of—or don't care about—historic preservation. I think folks here have really bought into the idea that historic preservation in some form or another is a vital part of this city."

McKnight holds a degree in Anthropology/Archaeology from Western Washington University, and a Master of Urban Planning (Preservation Planning) from the University of Washington. Born and raised in Seattle, he has served on the Seattle Landmarks Preservation Board and currently sits on the board of the Washington Trust for Historic Preservation. He also serves as a nonvoting ex officio board member at Historic Tacoma—a grassroots, citizen-based organization focused on historic preservation in Tacoma. McKnight lives in the Lincoln District with his wife, Maija, community programs coordinator at Tacoma Art Museum, and young daughter.

I met McKnight last week in his 10th floor corner cubicle overlooking (appropriately enough) the historic Vintage Y to learn more about his role as the city's historic preservation officer.

TACOMA DAILY INDEX: *When did you start working as the City's historic preservation officer, and what do you do?*

REUBEN MCKNIGHT: I started on contract with the city in October 2003, and accepted a full-time position in December 2003. My job is to provide staff support to the landmarks commission, as well as administer the historic preservation program for the city.

INDEX: *What is that program?*

MCKNIGHT: The historic preservation program involves the protection and designation of specific landmarks to the Tacoma Register of Historic places, processing tax incentive applications for the property tax incentives involving historic properties, and also advising the city, commission, and other agencies about historic preservation policies and regulations. So I act also as the city's liaison on historic preservation matters.

INDEX: *How did you get interested in historic preservation?*

MCKNIGHT: I started off an archaeologist. As an undergraduate, I got my degree in archaeology and then spent a number of years working as a commercial archeologist on contract. Basically, there would be a project, we would work for a consulting compa-



Putting History In The City's Future An interview with Reuben McKnight

ny and go out and survey and do data recovery and that sort of thing. I did that for about three years. I found I was spending too much time on the road, so I decided I would go back to graduate school. One of the things I was interested in was dealing more with management level issues involving historic and cultural resources. I thought to myself, well, planning is a good way to accomplish that. Kind of leverage my current expertise into a new direction. I enrolled in graduate school and following that just kind of got lucky. I served on the Seattle landmarks board for a term and worked for Historic Seattle. I sort of approached it from that direction. Even when I was working in archaeology, one of my big fascinations was historical archeology, such as old mining camps. Historic preservation was sort of a natural progression for me. Archeologists do two basic kinds of work in the field. One is to stay in one spot, excavating a site trying to recover data from one particular area that's going to be, in a lot of cases, impacted by a project; or testing, you do a statistical sample of an area by actually physically testing below the surface. The other thing is survey, which is what I really like. Pedestrian surveys where you put on your hiking boots and backpack and you go out there and walk and look. The project I worked on for the longest involved a river corridor survey. Basically, it was walking along the course of a river for 50 miles and documenting archaeological sites along the way. They included ranching claims, mining claims, prehistoric occupation, and some of those mining sites went back into the late-1800s. Some of the Native American sites could have potentially gone back 8,000 to 10,000 years.

INDEX: *It has to be a big contrast between being out there and working in an office environment focused on policy.*

"Anybody who gets to work in a field that is derived from personal interest or following your ideals is pretty lucky," says Reuben McKnight, the City of Tacoma's historic preservation officer. "In that case, I think I'm doing that."

MCKNIGHT: Yes. It's a very big contrast. There are things I like about both. I enjoy working here. There's a large element of creativity. Anybody who gets to work in a field that is derived from personal interest or following your ideals is pretty lucky. In that case, I think I'm still doing that. I do miss spending six months out of the year outside hiking. It was a lot of fun—and good exercise.

INDEX: *Are there differences between historic preservation work in Seattle and Tacoma? Are there different issues?*

MCKNIGHT: I would say the issues are similar. Seattle's program is a bit more developed and integrated into the structure of the city's review processes. Obviously, there are certain differences between the way the two governments operate generally, and Tacoma is very well known for its excellent project review in terms of customer service. I would say one of the major differences between historic preservation in Tacoma and Seattle is the landmarks commission in Tacoma takes a lot of excitement in the projects that are proposed to it. There's kind of a hometown pride. That's not to say Seattle isn't like that, but we may review 60 or so projects a year in Tacoma, which is a respectable amount and makes us one of the largest programs in the state. Seattle may do 350 in a year. It's different. But the historic preservation

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1 program here is really integrated into the community.

INDEX: What is your vision or plan for historic preservation in Tacoma?

MCKNIGHT: [One aspect is] forming a private, citizen-based grassroots group that would take up historic preservation issues. It was part of a list of things that I had really hoped to see when I was coming into the city. I saw that there were definite needs when I first started here in terms of how the historic preservation program functions—things that I see as priorities. Obviously, we updated the ordinance in 2005, which was a major step. We created a more modern language for the code. And we also integrated it better with the rest of the city's municipal code. Another thing we did was to better understand the functions of the other departments, and find out where in fact we had regulations, processes, and so forth that did involve historic preservation and try to get plugged into those and develop a working relationship with other departments. Part of the issue for this program is there has been some turnover in the position, and so we are sort of re-establishing those relationships and getting to know folks. Having a private, resident-based historic preservation voice was one of my major goals. I'm really excited to see Historic Tacoma. One of my strong personal beliefs about historic preservation is that I think there's an intrinsic value to it. But in terms of the city's role, I think the priorities really have to be compatible with those set by the community. Historic preservation's strength and meaning comes out of what the citizens of a town think of it. If it's a priority of the citizens, then it's a priority of the city. There are some aspects that are better addressed by citizen action groups, and some things addressed well by the city. I really think having a continuity to grassroots efforts in the city is a major step. We've had the Save Albers Mill group and the Murray Morgan group and so on, which have been very effective, but there haven't often been long-range sustained preservation groups. Preservation is an evolution of lots of things and we need continuity.

INDEX: It seems, to me at least, like it's been awhile since one individual has been the face of the city's historic preservation efforts. Your name comes up all the time in articles and local conversation about Tacoma history. And it seems like you come to this position with a high level of energy. Is it a job where there hasn't been much energy behind it for a while, and now you are coming into it fresh?

MCKNIGHT: I don't think so. There are a couple factors. The program is in better shape than it has been, but it's not in the best shape it's ever been. Certainly, I wouldn't call things a resounding success yet. I would say I'm glad for all the attention and the fact that historic preservation is on people's radar screens. That's really important. Trying to respond to that is important. The program itself has a long institutional history—the historic preservation program dates back to 1973. There have been lots of triumphs and losses along the way. It's just sort of been an evolving thing. The office itself has moved around within different departments and divisions. I would say the biggest factor in a job like this is continuity. I've been here three years. My two predecessors before that were here two years each. So over the course of seven years, three people have been in this position. And this is a position where there's not a large staff. When each person leaves, a lot of institutional memory goes away, too. You can find yourself in a position of reinventing the wheel constantly, trying to figure out what was going on before and what has been going on since. The program right now is benefiting from a high degree of interest. That's wonderful. Residents are taking a harder look at preservation as sort of a revitalization strategy. And developers and builders have a high degree of interest in participating in what's going on in the city downtown. At the same time, I think the die was cast many years ago when Union Station was rehabbed and when UW Tacoma decided they were going to locate in the warehouse district. Those are the decisions that really catalyzed everything that came after that. We are now in a lucky position to be able to capitalize on the results of those successes.

INDEX: Is that a reason why your position is housed in the city's economic development department?

MCKNIGHT: It's one of those things where the office of historic preservation could be in just about any department really. There's a very significant component of economic development in historic preservation. Sometimes people see a conflict between the two. Obviously, people's objectives can vary. But historic preservation is economic development in a lot of ways. The whole point of rehab is to take buildings that have been underutilized and underinvested in and get capital investment back in the building, get them back up to full occupancy: it increases the tax base for the city, it creates a dynamic town. So, I really think that economic development is certainly a major facet of the entire idea behind historic preservation. One misconception sometimes is that people think historic preservation stands in

the way of growth. It's really a process of planning your growth. These pieces of your community are important, so therefore preservation is going to be part of our vision for the future of the city, included with all the other things that are going to occur.

INDEX: By year's end, we'll see two historically significant building demolished: the Mattson House [an 80-year-old mansion in the city's north end razed in a single afternoon last spring] and First United Methodist Church [a 90-year-old building sold by the congregation to MultiCare Health System, which plans to tear down the building and expand its campus]. Are there vulnerabilities right now where buildings can be demolished overnight—

MCKNIGHT: Yes.

INDEX:—and is there a scramble to get some of these buildings on the city's historic register?

MCKNIGHT: I don't know if there is a scramble or not. I think the community should definitely be concerned. There are many, many buildings in the city that most people would consider to be very important. Many of those buildings, you would be surprised to find out, aren't on any sort of historic register. Mattson House certainly wasn't. First United Methodist Church is not listed on any historic register. When people ask, 'Is a building historic?' a lot of people are asking if it's listed on a historic register. I would distinguish that there are buildings that are City Landmarks, meaning that those buildings are listed on the Tacoma historic register and subject to protections. And there are just "historic buildings," meaning buildings we generally consider historic because they're old, and they have a significant place in our history. There are many such buildings that aren't [on a register] and there's no special protection on them at all. People ask me, being in historic preservation, 'Have you preserved anything lately?' They're being funny. I don't preserve anything. The landmarks commission doesn't preserve anything. And the city, for the most part, doesn't preserve anything except for the things it owns. The people who preserve buildings are the owners. The landmarks register allows for recognition of properties that are historically significant. And it allows, in some cases, for financial incentives to be levied on those properties. But for the most part, the preservation of a building comes down to the decision-making and priorities and values of the owners. In most cases, those values are very consistent with the preservation aspect. That's not to mean that things don't hang in the balance.