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Historic Decisions for Council

THE CITY COUNCIL, which enacted a strong Historic District Preservation Ordinance a year ago, will make some decisions Wednesday that will deeply affect how well that ordinance will be carried out.

The historic district ordinance has broad intent of great importance to Detroit's resurgence as a city, even apart from the structures immediately affected.

The ordinance offers a framework for preservation, rehabilitation and in some instances new development of sizeable areas of Detroit. It deals with existing structures, as well as the nature of new construction in the affected areas. And in addition to historic residential districts such as the three already designated by the city—Indian Village, Boston-Edison and West Canfield, the ordinance applies to such landmarks as Orchestra Hall, the Soldiers and Sailors Monument, and St. Joseph Roman Catholic Church. Other districts and landmarks may be added to the list.

A seven-member Historic District Commission, appointed by the mayor with approval of the City Council, will be the chief instrument for carrying out provisions of the ordinance. Mayor Young waited almost a year to choose his appointees, and then he named four city department heads among his seven choices: a majority that clearly would make the commission's decisions subject to the mayor's control. Because of public objections, the mayor now has removed one department head from his list of nominees.

The mayor's nominees, other than department heads, are: Isaac Steinberg, president of the Boston-Edison Association; Michael Higgins, who manages and owns properties in the Indian Village area; Louis Goldstein, an architect; and David McKeehan, of the Berry subdivision.

City Council President Carl Levin, at a council meeting last week, proposed that the historic district ordinance be amended to specify that city departments directly affected by the commission's work be non-voting members of the commission. That amendment will be introduced Wednesday and a vote on it will come at a future council meeting. In the meantime, the council should delay approval of the department heads Mayor Young has nominated and closely scrutinize the four others he has proposed.

If Mr. Levin's amendment is subsequently approved, the mayor then would nominate three more persons to replace the department heads as voting members.

Mr. Levin is right in urging this change in the ordinance. City officials must be prepared to work with the commission, not to govern its decisions. Other weaknesses in the ordinance also may need to be remedied. For instance, when new construction is authorized in the protected areas, the Historic District Commission should have authority to assure—perhaps through a bonding process—that the project will be completed as approved.

Beyond that, the council must be careful to avoid appointments that might involve conflicts of interest in future decisions on the use of property, and it should see that the commission has more than one member from the historic districts affected.

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