

LOCAL

As Historic Savannah Foundation plans shift, concerns swirl about its weight in the community

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For more than 68 years, the Historic Savannah Foundation established itself as the voice for historic preservation in Savannah and Chatham County — evident by the organization's initial mission in 1955 to save the 1820 Isaiah Davenport House from demolition.

Since then, HSF has saved 420 historic structures in Savannah and has invested more than \$3 million dollars in the community through its groundbreaking revolving fund model, which raises public and private funds money to purchase and stabilize vacant, blighted and endangered historic properties, sell them to preservation-minded buyers, then reinvest the proceeds to purchase other historic properties.

But as the preservation movement in Savannah evolves, property prices and taxes soar, and the Landmark Historic District remains under "threatened" status by the National Park Service, concerns swirl around HSF's weight and visibility in the community. Does it have the gravitas it once did to stop demolitions and rally citizens to the cause?

Pre-pandemic in 2019, HSF reported a membership roster of 439. That number dropped to 261 in 2022. Donations and fundraising have also dropped, from \$780,038 in 2019 to \$247,077 in 2021. Donations bounced back slightly in 2022, with a total of \$465,687. The pandemic slowdown precipitated the dip in both membership and donations, according to HSF leadership.

But other questions remain about the level of effort to preserve the Oglethorpe Plan in the face of unprecedented development and rumors of possible conflicts of interest among

board members who are also developers. Residents expressed to reporters both on and off the record that they are trying to reconcile an HSF they were familiar with to one that is now looking to shift its strategy and expand its preservation work outside the landmark district.

A new direction at the Davenport House Museum

In May, Jamie Credle, former director of the Davenport House, was fired from the historic home and museum. Credle, who'd recently won the Scott W. Smith Award for Excellence in Leadership from the Coastal Museum Association, had served as the museum's director for more than 20 years. Her removal has become a point of concern among long-time supporters of HSF, several of whom expressed their disapproval of her firing. Two volunteers left the organization after the decision, but all the staff remained.

The Savannah Morning News reached out to Credle, but she had no comment.

According to two people long involved with HSF, Credle's dismissal was not unexpected. Tensions between between HSF CEO and President Susan Adler and Credle had been mounting due to a back-and-forth over house museum governance and how HSF cooperates with its committees.

Austin Hill, chairman of HSF's Board of Trustees, said Credle's dismissal was an amicable step toward moving the Davenport House forward with a fresh new spin. That spin, Hill said, was ushered in by a number of other projects, including the the completion of the Murray C. Pearlman & Wayne C. Spear Preservation Center and the adaptive reuse of the historic Kennedy Pharmacy into the museum's gift shop.

The completion of those projects allowed for the conversion of the ground floor of the Davenport House into the Urban Enslaved exhibit. The Sheftall House, at 321 York St., serves as HSF's headquarters and sits directly across Columbia Square from the Davenport House. It is undergoing renovations now to provide more organized work, meeting and educational spaces for HSF's staff, members, programming and events.

But as these long-term projects come to fruition and after more than five decades focusing heavily on the Historic Landmark District, HSF, according to both Adler and Hill, is

hoping to move into saving structures in other neighborhoods, namely on Savannah's east and west sides.

“There are historic district residents that think we're losing sight of what our mission is, which is to save the historic district, but we saved 400 structures out here. We're still everyday keeping our fingers on the pulse of it, but there's other neighborhoods,” Hill said. “I don't think that a Twickenham family story or a West Savannah family story is any less valuable than a Monterey Square family.”

Allowance: Controversial 336 Barnard project nabs exception for front door

What is the Oglethorpe Plan? A deep dive into Savannah's historic town design

Less advocacy, more relationship-building

Some say that the rift started in 2020 when Adler was named president after Daniel Carey left the position in September of that year. Before her appointment, she joined the organization in April 2019 as HSF's chief mission officer and has stated that she considers herself a preservationist, but her passion and strength is in community engagement.

"To me it's stories and how we can work together to tell those stories and help each other tell those stories that are really important," Adler said.

She shared that the organizations strategic plan for the past three years has been focused on buildings, campus structures, and maintenance of those buildings.

However, residents have expressed their disappointment about the approval of certain developments, including the release of HSF's no-build easement on Goodwin Street when the new owners of the Mansion on Forsyth bought the property from Richard Kessler and brought plans to build a parking lot to HSF.

Hill said HSF conceded on the easement in order to improve the neighborhood and that they worked with the developers on a number of the design aspects of the property.

A Downtown Neighborhood Association meeting on April 18, however, was an indicator that some members of the community had weakening trust in the mission of the organization to preserve the Landmark Historic District, which has been deemed "threatened" by the National Park Service.

When Adler and Ryan Jarles, HSF's director of preservation and historic properties, took the podium to discuss preservation concerns in the landmark historic district, they were met with a lukewarm crowd who had reservations and questions about lack of visibility and preservation advocacy related to downtown developments, such as the housing project slated to rise at Oglethorpe Avenue and Habersham Street, consuming the former Savannah Police Station parking lot.

First City Progress: A look at the hotel set to replace the Mansion on Forsyth

"HSF made no effort to socialize. They came in and sat in a corner by themselves, gave their presentation," said David McDonald, the president of the Downtown Neighborhood Association. "They had nothing prepared. It was just a discussion to talk about preservation and what they're doing. And then as soon as they were done, they walked out and left. So, that got a lot of members upset to give the impression they weren't interested."

A community member also asked how the 17-story SCAD dorm between West River Street and West Indian Street received approval, bringing into focus a glaring problem: the confusion between what HSF has authority over, what it doesn't and the lack of information on that process.

In the meeting, Jarles explained that HSF has zero legal authority over zoning; it can only work with the Chatham County Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC) to uphold the Oglethorpe Plan. MPC is the entity with the capacity to stop subdivision of tithing lots, to limit heights and buffer conflicting developments.

Adler stated that, at the beginning of the pandemic, the city formed two boards under MPC to address developments and preservation. The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) and the Historic District Review Board (HDRB). The HPC reviews everything outside of the Historic Landmark District while the HDR reviews everything inside of it.

"Ryan is managing those committees [on behalf of HSF], so every project that goes in front of either HPC or HDR is reviewed by that committee," Adler said. "Because of his relationship with the city, he is meeting with the city with some of our comments even before we go to the public meeting, so we are very involved."

After Adler and Jarles left the April 18 meeting, Andrew Jones, president of the Oglethorpe Plan Coalition, took the podium for his presentation. The Oglethorpe Plan Coalition is a nonprofit dedicated to preserving the Savannah National Historic Landmark District and the 1733 Oglethorpe Plan, the guiding design document for the downtown and its treasured squares. Along with the DNA, it is an organization people have turned to outside of HSF to protect the district from excessive and inappropriate development.

“Some of these are residents and other DNA members who believe HSF is falling down on what they're doing as far as historic preservation, so they're trying to step into that vacuum,” McDonald said.

HSF does not have a short- or long-term strategic plan that outlines its priorities over the next three to five year, and Adler said their won't be while she's in a leadership position because her philosophy is that plans should be organic and not line shelves. For now, HSF is focused on building engagement with different interests in downtown and in other historic districts throughout the city.

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