

Holding onto history: Bozeman preservation effort gathers steam

By Katheryn Houghton Chronicle Staff Writer



Michael Wallner, chair of the Historic Preservation Board, and Phillipe Gonzalez, a city historic preservation specialist, stand in front of The Rialto, one of the 2018 Bozeman Historic Preservation Award winners, on Wednesday, May 9, 2018, in downtown Bozeman.

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It's been a while since the boards were pulled off Bozeman's reestablished Rialto Theatre. On a recent afternoon, Michael Wallner squinted as he looked at the theater's vertical sign above a 1920s-style ticket booth, its silver catching the sun.

The 1908 post office turned screening theater when films took over Hollywood. After the building sat vacant for roughly a decade, a new group stepped in [with plans](#) in 2015 to bring the icon back as a music destination.

Their success is proof, said Wallner, chair of the city's citizen Historic Preservation Advisory Board.

"Bozeman can hang onto its history," he said.

The Rialto tied with the Masonic Temple for the board's 2018 outstanding achievement award for historic preservation. The annual awards include titles like adaptive reuse, preservation stewardship and continued maintenance.

The ceremony had a brief hiatus the last few years, but Wallner said its return is a sign that the voices working for history in Bozeman are on the rise again.

“With our growth, it’s now more important than ever to promote historic preservation and celebrate when that happens,” he said.

Wallner said that effort got a boost in October when Phil Gonzalez arrived in Bozeman as the city’s historic preservation specialist — a role without a full-time person for roughly three years. Gonzalez is the first person on the job who won’t have to dip out of preservation to fill in city planning. His resume reads history buff.

Gonzalez has an undergraduate degree in history from Humboldt State University in northern California and a master’s degree from Georgia State University. He worked in the backcountry of Olympic National Park assessing and repairing historic structures. In Atlanta, he joined the city’s preservation program and taught kids carpentry while working on Martin Luther King Jr.’s house.

“A structure can’t be historic if it doesn’t maintain that physical integrity that you’re tying it back to,” Gonzalez said. “That’s the part I actually love, the craftsmanship, the design, the materials, those elements that help recreate what the past looked like.”

Gonzalez’s main job in Bozeman is to enforce preservation rules and outline long-term goals. He’s also the person helping track the buildings that carry an image of Bozeman’s past.

Preservation starts with properties that are 50 years old, so there are new contenders each year.

For that work to last, people need to be able to find what’s made the list. Gonzalez worked with the city to move its records of historic sites online. The resulting GIS map acts as a capsule of Bozeman’s built environment.

The map holds the city’s initial historic intake from the 1980s. The genesis of Bozeman’s preservation program, the city surveyed roughly 2,000 properties. That became the foundation for the first Bozeman historic districts and the rules of building within them.

“The GIS map was a big push to put what was essentially thousands of pieces of paper in a binder behind a desk, only available at request, to available online to anyone,” Gonzalez said.

The city’s also set to restructure its preservation program and reevaluate its Neighborhood Conservation Overlay District. Adopted in 1991, it prioritized maintaining patterns within historic neighborhoods that developers had to weave into their plans within a district.

“It’s worked well but as Bozeman continues to grow, it’s about asking how we continue forward,” Gonzalez said.

He said that work will need feedback.

Vicky York, a member of the citizen advisory board, said getting the word out about upcoming changes and being part of the conversation is a priority for the volunteer group over the next year.

York, a Bozeman resident of 30 years, said after a few years of lacking in volunteers — “like most citizen boards” — the body is stacked again.

“We’re working to reestablish ourselves,” she said. “Historic preservation really is the character of Bozeman. We know each community has its own story to tell.”

The Bozeman Historic Preservation Awards ceremony is Saturday at 7 p.m. at the Story Mansion.