

# Historic homes: Presentation touches on challenges, benefits of owning an historic home in Bisbee

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Bisbee homeowner Jon Sky stands next to his Laundry Hill Street home in this file photo. The house has been the subject of controversy, as neighbors have unsuccessfully claimed it violated Old Bisbee building codes

BISBEE — For those who have ever considered buying or repairing one of the unique, longstanding homes that dot the hills of Bisbee’s historic district, there are numerous incentives — as well as responsibilities and even difficulties — that come with ownership.

City building inspector Joe Ward went over some of complexities of historic home ownership in a presentation at the Copper Queen Library on Tuesday night. While Bisbee is a “gorgeous” and pleasant place to live, said Ward, owning an historic home in the town isn’t as simple as one might expect.

“You’ve got some responsibilities that come with it — you can’t just do whatever you want with your house,” he explained. “In some ways, it doesn’t entirely belong to you.”

There are 578 “contributing structures” in Bisbee’s historic district, a number that includes houses, stairways, bridges, and retaining walls, Ward said. Contributing structures must meet certain architectural requirements that contribute to the historic significance of an area; in Bisbee, for instance, terracing is a unique feature of many contributing homes, which must be built before 1938 in order to qualify, he said.

A major benefit of owning and maintaining a qualifying home is the property tax incentive, said Ward, which is around a 50 percent abatement for eligible owners who live in the house as their primary residence. People must submit an application to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) in order to apply, he said.

“They want you to have that because the state is interested in setting aside money for the upkeep and maintenance and preservation of the homes,” Ward said.

Maintaining historic homes isn’t without its challenges, he continued. Most exterior alterations beyond normal housekeeping require the approval of the Bisbee Design Review board, which usually meets once a month to go over the \$25 applications.

Even if the structure you live in doesn’t qualify as a “contributing structure,” said Ward, but is in the historic district, you still must get changes to the home approved in order to maintain the integrity of the area. Installing solar panels on an historic home, for example, would require meeting an elaborate set of criteria, he said.

“(It’s important) for people to understand that they’re under the regulations that the Design Review Board has established, and before they make any exterior changes, they’ve got to get permission,” he said.

Bisbee homeowner Jon Sky recently learned that the hard way, getting caught in a legal battle with neighbors over a massive remodel he undertook on his historic Laundry Hill home. Neighbors accused Sky of thumbing his nose at the city’s regulations, though Sky ultimately prevailed in multiple hearings on the matter.

One of the neighbors, however, says he still intends to pursue what he sees as an appropriate resolution through the courts.

The library hopes to bring in more city employees like Ward to chat about the workings of the town, especially as the city was going through some “transitions” with a recent move to a new city hall and staffing changes, said program coordinator Alison Williams.

“It really is great to have him here,” she said. “We’ve really been reaching out to city departments, letting them know that this is the perfect venue for them to come here and tell us what they do, so we’re excited that Joe took us up on that.”

With questions about historic home ownership in Bisbee, contact Ward at [jward@bisbeeaz.gov](mailto:jward@bisbeeaz.gov). For information about upcoming events at the Copper Queen Library, visit [www.bisbeeaz.gov](http://www.bisbeeaz.gov).