

New fund aims to boost historic projects

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A new charitable fund based in Marion County intends to redress a growing shortfall in government and private grants for reconstructing historic buildings. And organizers hope many such funds will soon spring up all over Indiana.

The Marion County Historic Preservation Fund was jointly established by the Historic Landmarks Foundation of Indiana and the Indianapolis Foundation last month with funds of \$100,000. It will make grants of \$5,000 this year and hopes to increase that to \$100,000 within 10 years, earmarked for not-for-profit organizations that own historic buildings in need of repair.

"Money for bricks and mortar [reconstruction projects] is hard to come by because of more limited government resources as a result of government downsizing," said Tony Macklin, program officer with the Indianapolis Foundation. "Plus, there is no dedicated fund granting resources in Marion County for bricks and mortar projects."

The Historic Preservation Fund kicked off in August with an initial annual grant of \$50,000 by the Historic Landmarks Foundation, matched equally by the Indianapolis Foundation. The Indianapolis Foundation also intends to match, 50 cents on the dollar, any outside contributions.

Through this combination of donations, fund organizers hope the fund will reach \$2 million in value within the next 10 years. The fund will spend 5 percent of its total value in construction grants each year. The fund's advisory committee, which will decide on projects to receive grants, conducted its inaugural meeting Aug. 25 under the chairmanship of Indiana Supreme Court Chief Justice Randall T. Shepard. Its next meeting, scheduled for later this month, will finalize the grant-application process and discuss possible target projects for this year.

The lack of government money available for refurbishing historic structures is being felt across Indiana as well as in Indianapolis, according to Amy Kotzbauer, Central Regional Office director of the Historic Landmarks Foundation.

Kotzbauer said the federal government now gives only around \$300,000 to \$400,000 in grants for "bricks and mortar" historic reconstruction for the entire state.

And private granting agencies, Kotzbauer said, often have a steadfast rule against funding historic construction projects. She said even the Historic Landmarks Foundation generally gives low-interest loans rather than grants for historic reconstruction projects.

Although the new fund is based in Marion County, Kotzbauer said it will lay the foundation for a series of local historic preservation funds across Indiana, beginning with South Bend and Gary.

"We chose Marion County because [the Indianapolis Foundation] was prepared to experiment with the idea," she said. "We hope to repeat the experiment all around the state."

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Ken Gladish, Indianapolis Foundation's executive director, said forming such funds through a partnership between a statewide and a local agency should be "a stimulus to those who wouldn't have given otherwise because of suspicions about statewide agencies."

Although the Historic Preservation Fund will have only \$5,000 available for grants this year, Kotzbauer said the money will be dispersed.

"I feel it would be best to make one or two grants this year," she said. "I hope that if we show a desire to spend money, it will attract more."

And there's plenty to spend it on in Marion County, said Macklin. He breaks down the region's major historic preservation needs into three key areas.

One is reuse of abandoned school buildings and churches. Macklin said there are too many such structures in downtown Indianapolis, damaging the city's vitality, and they need to be returned to commercial use.

Another is neighborhoods in transition, where Macklin said the aim is to "preserve the integrity of the historic housing stock."

The third is projects in smaller historic commercial districts, such as the recently rehabilitated Fountain Square precinct, on the city's south-east side. Macklin said a number of small-business clusters in Indianapolis, such as Fountain Square, thrived around the turn of the century and "we're looking at turning those [areas] around."

Most grants, Kotzbauer said, would be for exterior work only and would probably fall into one of "the three big categories of roofing work, window repair or tuck-pointing of masonry." There wouldn't be [funding for] reconstruction of interior space unless it contained something very significant," she said.

This preference for exterior work arises from what's known as "curb appeal," Macklin said. Such refurbishment is popular, he pointed out, because it raises values in the entire neighborhood as well as for the reconstructed property.

Macklin and Kotzbauer predicted that once the fund has around \$100,000 available for reconstruction grants, it will be able to fund a larger range of projects.

"My feeling is that amount of money wouldn't be spent on just one project," Macklin said. "More likely we would make several grants, ranging from \$1,000 to \$2,000 up to \$20,000 to \$30,000 per year."

But even then, demand for reconstruction money will far outstrip supply. Even when the fund reaches its \$100,000 target for annual grants, it will still be turning away projects, Macklin said.

Demand is high despite the fact that funds like the Historic Preservation Fund are unable, for taxation purposes, to give reconstruction grants to individuals.

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For projects that don't qualify for a Historic Preservation Fund grant, Macklin said the fund can still help in other ways. "Our job will be to help those people think through alternative strategies," he said.