

Solar panels OK in Cape, just hide them

By RICHARD DEGENER, Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, December 20, 2009 |

CAPE MAY - The city is allowing an 1888 hotel in the Historic District to go green, as long as nobody can see it.

The Historic Preservation Commission decided to allow solar panels on the Carroll Villa Hotel, but only after making sure they would not be noticed by people strolling below on historic Jackson Street.

The project is the first the commission has ruled on involving solar panels.

"This is a landmark to a landmark," said Hugh McCauley, the project architect, who noted alternative energy is on such a roll these days that even "stodgy old Cape May" has to accept it.

Commission member Tom Carroll said the panel had to balance the benefits of alternative energy projects, such as solar panels and windmills, with the goal of keeping the city as historically accurate as possible. Cape May is registered as a National Historic Landmark.

"We are going to try and permit things that do not have a visual impact on the beauty of our Historic District," Carroll said.

The commission ruled on the case last week after visiting the property, checking out designs for the 38 solar panels, researching what other historic districts in the country are doing, and checking with state and federal bodies that protect historic sites. The U.S. Department of the Interior and the New Jersey Office of Historic Preservation were consulted.

The commission also heard testimony about the project at several meetings before unanimously approving it. The Carroll Villa Hotel property, which includes the Mad Batter Restaurant, is owned by Mark Kulkowitz, who presented several experts to testify about the project.

"The key is to have the panels not visible. The panels will only intrude about two to three inches over the roof line," said Lou Dwyer, Kulkowitz's attorney.

McCauley said the low slope of the third-floor roof prevented visibility, but with a steeper roof he agreed such projects should not be allowed.

"If it had slope to the street, alley, pathways or neighbor's yards, you'd have to say no. That's the kind of roofs you don't want it on. You could end up with people misapplying this decision," McCauley said.

Kulkowitz said he was happy with the commission's decision, adding the project is beneficial economically and environmentally. He expects to save on energy costs at the 21-room hotel and restaurant but notes he also embraces green features at his business such as waterless urinals, energy-saving light bulbs, recycled materials and a water-saving dishwasher.

"It's a financially prudent decision, and it's a good thing," Kulkowitz said. "You have a building from the 1800's moving forward to the 21st century."

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The Historic Preservation Commission process

Plans are first reviewed by planning and zoning officials. If they could affect historic building, they go to the Historic Preservation Commission, which can review such plans under the Certified Local Governments, or CLG, program. The CLG follows U.S. Department of Interior and state Office of Historic Preservation guidelines, as well as its own.

The commission can issue a Certificate of Appropriateness to a project or can cite guidelines and issue a Not Appropriate ruling. Alternative energy projects can be approved if they have no impact or neutral impact on historic building.

Appeals go to local Zoning Board for a hearing.

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