



THIS OLD HOUSE

◇ Incentives for Preserving Historic Homes ◇

BY SOUTH SOUND STAFF | PHOTOS COURTESY JEFF WILLIAMS

◇ **Built-in bookshelves**, wood-wrapped windows and an inviting front porch that is big enough to sit and visit with neighbors while sipping tall glasses of ice-cold lemonade. Many older homes found throughout the South Sound are full of character and charm not easily reproduced in newer construction, but many people are apprehensive to take on an older home. » ◇



Go to historictacoma.org and tacomaculture.org to learn more. And check out Williams' historic home listings, read his blog and see more of his historic home flips at southsoundpropertygroup.com.



According to Dr. Caroline Swope, co-founder and board president of Historic Tacoma, a group dedicated to preserving the area's architectural legacy, owning and restoring an older home can be more affordable than you think.

For example, in Tacoma there is the Special Tax Valuation Program where some owners may qualify for reduced property taxes for up to 10 years as incentive to rehabilitate historic homes or buildings. Since 1986, the City of Tacoma has approved more than \$100 million worth of tax breaks through the program.

For Swope it made a huge difference when she bought a home in Tacoma that was built in the early 1900s and needed its outdated plumbing system brought to modern standards. "It's great for the city, too," she said about the program, saying that homes that are cared for are better than having derelict buildings that pull down property values, attract crime and could be fire hazards.

She also points out that any home – new or not – will require maintenance. But homes that are 50 years or older already have stood the test of time. They were often built with solid, quality products you just don't see in new construction, such as old growth timber, brick and mortar. Since a tremendous amount of energy goes into home construction, renovating and maintaining an existing home can be considered an environmentally friendly choice, too.

To qualify for the Tacoma tax break, your home or building must be listed on the Tacoma Register of Historic Places. To be considered the home must be 50 years old or older, retain its integrity of location, design and materials and meet other criteria. You have to do a little homework, which includes researching the property and then you must apply. The Landmarks Commission reviews the applications and the City Council must pass a resolution. The process generally takes 4-5 months.

There are national, state, county and city level historic registries – historic building owners need to research the best route for their situation.

Many people don't realize they can apply to get their home

or building considered for any register. And sometimes they are concerned that if their home is on a historic register, that it will limit what they can do to their property.

But it's not as restrictive as you might think and the benefits – such as the Tacoma tax break, can make it more than worth it, said Jeff Williams of Windermere Real Estate in Tacoma. He has restored and flipped more than 30 historic homes in California and in the South Sound and also is on the Historic Tacoma board. He's also a historic homeowner.

"I see it as a positive. I'm always encouraging clients to list their home on the historic home register," he said. He's saving nearly \$1,000 a year in property taxes thanks to the city's special tax valuation program for renovations he made on his own home.

If your property is listed on the registry in Tacoma, you can make repairs, alterations and additions to meet modern uses, but you must preserve the historical, cultural or architectural integrity of the property.

If you really love old homes, then repairs that help the home stay true to its roots would likely be your goal anyway, Williams explained. Nothing makes him cringe more than seeing an 1890s Victorian modernized to look like a newer Puyallup tract house and don't even get him started on vinyl windows.

There still are a lot of historic homes in Tacoma – and throughout Western Washington. The key is finding ones that still maintain their historic character. "I love living in an old house," Williams said. "That's why I kind of made it my niche for real estate. (Historic homes) tend to be located in the fabric of the community. Oftentimes the neighborhoods are more walkable ... they have unique qualities.

"It's a rewarding experience to take an old house that has been there for 100 years and restore it to a level that it can be there for another 100 years." ©