

Help From the National Trust Resource Center  
Information Sheet #12  
**HISTORIC DISTRICTS**

*This information sheet is supplied by the National Trust to address questions related to Historic Districts. It provides explanations for topics such as what defines a historic district, the primary benefit of establishment, the steps of formation, and the process of monitoring historic districts.*

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**National Trust Resources**

- **National Trust Forum** is a National Trust membership for preservation professionals and volunteer leaders. As a Forum member, you receive the *Forum Journal*, *Forum News*, member discounts on *Preservation Books*, access to the password-protected web site Forum Online, as well as full membership privileges to the National Trust. Forum members have the ability to communicate on-line with other preservation professionals, and historic districts are a frequent topic of discussion on the list serve. In addition, Forum keeps members up to date on the latest preservation issues, and members have access to a wide variety of preservation resources. For more information about the Forum program, or to become a Forum member, call (202) 588-6053.
- The National Trust publishes booklets on issues pertaining to historic districts, including titles such as *Maintaining Community Character: How to Establish a Local Historic District*, *Design Review in Historic Districts*, *Design and Development: Infill Housing Compatible with Historic Districts*, *Rescuing Historic Resources: How to Respond to a Preservation Emergency*, and *Protecting America's Historic Neighborhoods: Taming the Teardown Trend*. For more information about these and other publications, call (202) 588-6296 or go to the

***Protecting the Irreplaceable***

**Preservation Books** web site at [www.preservationbooks.org](http://www.preservationbooks.org).

- Plan to attend our **National Preservation Conference** which is held each fall. For more information, visit the conference website at [www.nthpconference.org](http://www.nthpconference.org) or call (202) 588-6100.
- The National Trust's **Resource Center** has written basic information sheets on many aspects of preservation including information sheets on historic buildings and homes, sacred sites, and moving historic buildings. This information sheet on historic districts is an example of one of the information sheets the Resource Center has available. To contact the Resource Center, call (202) 588-6164 or send an e-mail to [info@nthp.org](mailto:info@nthp.org).
- **The National Trust Library** contains information on historic preservation, restoration, historic theaters, mail order houses, and many other related subjects. To contact the National Trust Library, write to the Hornbake Library, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742-7011 or call (301) 405-6320. You can also search the library collection on-line at <http://www.lib.umd.edu/NTL/ntl.html>.
- National Trust Insurance Services (NTIS), administered by the firm of Maury, Donnelly & Parr, specializes in **insuring historic properties**, both commercially and personally owned. NTIS can help owners of historic buildings and homes evaluate their insurance needs and obtain the coverage necessary. For more information, please call 1-866-269-0944 or e-mail [info@nationaltrust-insurance.org](mailto:info@nationaltrust-insurance.org); or visit their website at <http://www.nationaltrust-insurance.org/>
- **Join the National Trust** - The National Trust is committed to improving the livability of communities through historic preservation. With your membership, you're helping demonstrate to all Americans how protecting our past can enhance our quality of life. As a member, you'll enjoy many benefits including our magazine *Preservation*, discounts at some of our historic sites and Historic Hotels of America member hotels, as well as other special offers we make available to our members throughout the year. To join, fill out the form at the end of this information sheet.

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The information on the following pages is excerpted from the National Trust publications listed above and the National Park Service's website. For more information, visit <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/workingonthepast/benefits.htm> or [www.preservationbooks.org](http://www.preservationbooks.org)

### **An Overview and Brief History of Historic Districts**

Local historic districts are areas in which historic buildings and their settings are protected by public review, and encompass buildings deemed significant to the city's cultural fabric. A property included in a historic district, valued for its historical associations or architectural quality, is worth protecting because it is a virtue to the special and unique personality of the city. For example, the Gaslamp Quarter Historic District in San Diego, California, has maintained the unique turn-of-the-century architectural character of the area through its pedestrian focus with shops, restaurants, galleries and street vendors. A primary planning goal of this historic district is to preserve the richness of the past while providing continuity with the present and future. The first historic district was formed in 1931 when the city of Charleston, South Carolina enacted a local ordinance designating an "Old and Historic District." This ordinance prohibited changes

to exterior architectural features that were visible from a public street. Other cities soon followed: the Vieux Carre Commission was created in 1937 to preserve the French Quarter in New Orleans, Louisiana; San Antonio, Texas passed an ordinance in 1939 to protect an original Mexican village marketplace La Villita; the Georgetown neighborhood in Washington, D.C. came under protection in 1950 as a result of legislation enacted by Congress. By 1965, 51 communities across the country had similar preservation ordinances, a number that has grown exponentially to over 2,300 communities in the U.S. today.

### **Advantages of Establishing a Historic District**

One of the strongest qualities of local historic district designation is that it can be tailored to the specific needs and distinct identity of the community, and helps to protect and preserve local resources, even while the community is changing. Development that enhances a historic district is important to the city's evolution since it ties past, present and future together. Change further indicates a healthy and lively community, and reflects the united pride and investment the residents have in their neighborhood. There are numerous other advantages to establishing a local historic district

- *Local districts protect the investments of owners and residents.* Buyers know that the aspects that make a particular area attractive will be protected over a period of time. Real estate agents in many cities use historic district status as a marketing tool to sell properties.
- *Local districts encourage better design.* It has been shown through comparative studies that there is a greater sense of relatedness, more innovative use of materials, and greater public appeal within historic districts than in areas without historic designations.
- *Local districts help the environment.* Historic district revitalization can, and should, be part of a comprehensive environmental policy.
- *The educational benefits of creating local districts are the same as those derived from any historic preservation effort.* Districts can help explain the development of a place, the source of inspiration, and technological advances. They are a record of ourselves and our communities.
- *A local district can result in a positive economic impact from tourism.* A historic district that is aesthetically cohesive and well promoted can be a community's most important attraction. The retention of historic areas as a way to attract tourist dollars makes good economic sense.
- *The protection of local historic districts can enhance business recruitment potential.* Companies continually re-locate to communities that offer their workers a higher quality of life, which is greatly enhanced by successful local preservation programs and stable historic districts.
- *Local districts provide social and psychological benefits.* A sense of empowerment and confidence develops when community decisions are made through a structured participatory process rather than behind closed doors or without public comment.

### **Obstacles**

Some obstacles to historic districts may include: perceived invasion of private property rights,

fear of additional expenditures, fear of displacement and gentrification, apathy, development pressure, and lack of awareness of the significance of historical resources. These issues are addressed in more detail in the Trust publications and on the National Park Service website.

### **Components of a Local Historic District**

Historic district significance is ascribed to a collection of buildings, structures, sites and spaces comprising integrity of location, design, materials, workmanship, feeling and association. Local districts and reasons for creating them vary, but are generally based on two components:

1. Adoption of a local preservation ordinance, with provisions for designating historic resources, creating a local review board, and writing local design review guidelines, and
2. Creation of a design review board called a preservation commission.

### **Preservation Ordinances**

A preservation ordinance is local legislation created to protect buildings and neighborhoods from destruction or thoughtless rehabilitation. In general, local laws are stronger than federal laws, so a local historic preservation ordinance provides the real defense against inappropriate exterior remodeling and demolition within the historic district. Its special strength comes as the combined voice of residents, the majority of who agreed to use local laws as a tool to preserve the historic character of their homes, businesses, and streetscapes. Open discussion and debate of all affected by the process is crucial to its success. A preservation ordinance does such things as establish an objective and democratic process for designation historic properties, protect the integrity of designated historic properties within a design review requirement, and authorize design guidelines for new development within historic districts to ensure it is not destructive to the area's historic character. Generally, a local preservation ordinance does not restrict the sale of the property, require improvements, changes, or restoration of the property, prevent new construction in historic areas, or require approval of interior alterations or ordinary maintenance. For more information on local preservation ordinances, contact the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions at P.O. Box 1605, Athens, GA 30603, or by calling (706) 542-4731, or by emailing [napc@uga.edu](mailto:napc@uga.edu).

### **Creating a Historic District Preservation Commission**

Historic District Commissions operate at the local level. Sometimes they are referred to as the architectural review board or the historic preservation commission. Frequently appointed by the mayor, the commissions have a range of responsibilities and powers depending upon the state and local laws. Typically, commissions conduct town and/or county wide surveys, designate locally significant landmarks, and administer permit programs for applications to alter designated properties and construct new buildings. Decisions to alter or demolish historic buildings are generally made at this level of government and are most affected by local zoning laws and ordinances. For more information on historic district commissions, contact the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions at P.O. Box 1605, Athens, GA 30603, or by calling (706) 542-4731, or by emailing [napc@uga.edu](mailto:napc@uga.edu). You may also call your local government for your district's contact information.

*Designating Historic Resources:* Each state has a different set of statutes to guide local governments in establishing preservation commissions, but most have specific laws regarding commission composition, provisions for due process, definitions for what constitutes a local district or landmark, and exemptions and penalty provisions. Contact your state historic

preservation office (SHPO) or statewide preservation organization (refer to Page 8) to find out how your state facilitates the creation of local districts.

*Writing Local Design Review Guidelines:* Special care should be taken when devising a set of design guidelines, as they provide a basis for making fair decisions, consistency in design review, incentives for investment, property value enhancement, and a tool for education. Developing a set of design review guidelines is a complex process involving a diverse array of parties. In general, the adoption of design review guidelines should begin with identification of the community's shared preservation goals, often written and expanded in a preservation plan. To define these goals, various relationships must be examined: the historic structures themselves as they exist, along with the pressures for change that affect them now and have in the past. Design review guidelines should also address elements contributing to neighborhood character, such as building use, architectural period, architectural styles, building relationships, and street features.

*Design Guidelines for New Development:* This area covers both additions to existing buildings and new buildings. Additions must address how to integrate new portions with existing buildings, and to what degree historical architectural styles should be reflected. Likewise, new buildings may also be required to incorporate a prevailing historical style, or more often to proclaim their newness but simultaneously remain unobtrusive and compatible with the historic context. A frequent criticism of design review boards is that they stifle creativity in design of new or infill structures; however this is rarely the case, as most districts emphasize adherence to context and design elements rather than styles, allowing for flexible interpretation. Such elements may include: building height, scale, orientation, spacing, projections, roof forms, window patterns, façade proportions, entrance and porch size and proportion, materials, textures and color, and landscaping.

*Historic Districts and Local Planning Issues:* Historic preservation is a significant part of the overall community planning process. Though not an integral component for the operation of local planning, historic preservation has repeatedly demonstrated the positive results of including it as an element. Its role in combating wholesale destruction and deterring the creation of faceless planned failures is noteworthy in numerous communities, and the identification and protection process of local historic districts coupled with a landmark protection program works with other facets of the comprehensive plan to complete the best possible picture of community development. Zoning, one of the chief components of community planning, defines areas or districts and specifies how the land can be used, and close cooperation between the zoning board and historic district commission ensures the success of a coherent community vision.

### **Effective Administration of Local Historic Districts**

One of the most important questions frequently at the center of successful commission decisions is how the board decides what "appropriate" essentially means. Relevant professional disciplines (i.e. architecture, law, history) are not always available for representation on local review commissions, but taking advantage their expertise is valuable whenever possible. A particularly important device that promotes consistency and uniformity is the design guidelines, which spell out clearly the changes appropriate for various historic resource types and also set standards for new construction. These guidelines aid the commission in determining what is appropriate. They also guide developers and property owners. Effective administration is critical for the successful implementation and execution of design guidelines; without it, the most carefully framed guidelines can be resented. Success in the review process is influenced by the quality of

its administration, characterized by timeliness, good communication, clear design guidelines, consistent review procedures, and well-explained, documented decisions involving four groups:

- *The Review Board:* Ideally, members of the review board will be knowledgeable about and committed to architecture, preservation, planning, community development, real estate, law, and other related fields. A general knowledge of the area is also beneficial.
- *Staff:* While the division of labor between board members and municipal staff varies greatly, staff is often shared with municipal agencies such as the planning department or building inspector. Staff members conduct the bulk of review work, acting as a critical aid to efficient and expedited decision making.
- *Applicants:* Having a clearly defined review process in place is a key element to working with applicants effectively. There should be schedules for submission, review, assessment, and public hearings, with simple, clear submission forms that list required attachments. Early dialogue between review boards and applicants is recommended.
- *The Public:* Without public support, design guidelines will certainly fail, so this group is the most important and maintaining good relations with the public must be a top priority of successful design review boards. This goal can be achieved through education and publication programs providing clear, concise explanations of design review guidelines.

Many commissions make decisions based on *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards and Guidelines for Rehabilitations* (see below for additional information). Though a good starting foundation, they rarely provide adequate guidance by themselves for non-professional commissioners and owners who are not familiar with basic preservation and design principles and many commissions supplement them with guidelines developed internally or by a consultant. Ultimately, the effectiveness of a local historic district commission and its design review guidelines is determined by how well its decisions are enforced and its ability to stand strong against legal challenges. The design review authority should be acknowledged as a legitimate component of the community's regulatory structure, and both municipal staff and elected officials must aggressively enforce provisions of the preservation ordinance, even if unpopular.

#### **Other Frequently Asked Questions** <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/workingonthepast/toolbox3.htm>

*Q:* I am confused about what kind of historic preservation activities may be carried out by local governments, as opposed to state and federal governments. Are local activities limited in nature?

*A:* No, local communities can carry out a wider variety of historic preservation activities, such as conducting surveys, developing a local preservation ordinance, and designating properties.

*Q:* What are the benefits and requirements of becoming a Certified Local Government (CLG)?

*A:* The benefits include eligibility to compete for federal funds annually allocated to the SHPO for historic preservation, direct participation in review and approval of nominations to the National Register, and technical training and assistance, and formal recognition that a community's historic preservation program meets state and federal standards. A SHPO generally requires the CLG to submit an annual report summarizing activities and accomplishments, and conducts a performance evaluation once every four years.

*Q:* I am interested in learning more about creating a historic district—and as quickly as possible. Can you provide me with information on how to do this?

*A:* It is possible to establish a historic district under Federal, State, or local law, but in the

designation process should not, under any circumstances, be rushed. The appropriate amount of information must be compiled and analyzed and the public process played out so everyone has adequate time to hear about the designation proposal and provide comment.

*Q:* Can my State Historic Preservation Office give financial and other assistance to use while we're trying to create a historic district?

*A:* Yes, it can. Through technical assistance and matching grants, the SHPO helps communities build successful preservation programs to protect historic buildings, structures, and archaeological sites.

*Q:* I was told I would have to get a "Certificate of Appropriateness" from our historic preservation commission before starting exterior work on my house. What is the certificate, and what should I do?

*A:* Local historic districts have preservation ordinances requiring proposed work on designated historic properties be reviewed by a local historic preservation commission or design review board. When the board reviews and approves proposed changes to a historic building, they issue a "Certificate of Appropriateness," a document stating that the proposed work is appropriate for the historic district and meets local code criteria. Contact your city government's preservation official for specific information about what is needed for a Certificate of Appropriateness, the design review process, and to obtain an application for proposed exterior work.

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Other resources and information:

### **National Alliance of Preservation Commissions**

The NAPC is the only organization devoted solely to representing the nation's preservation design review commissions. NAPC provides technical support and manages an information network to help local commissions accomplish their preservation objectives. The Alliance also serves as an advocate at federal, state and local levels of government to promote policies and programs that support preservation commission efforts. Their website is an excellent resource and is located at <http://www.sed.uga.edu/psso/programs/napc/napc.htm> or e-mail them at [napc@uga.edu](mailto:napc@uga.edu)

### **State Historic Preservation Office**

Your State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), a state government office, is an invaluable source of information and should be contacted early in the planning process. The name and address of every SHPO is available on the National Trust's web site at <http://www.preservationnation.org/resources/faq/historic-homes/shpo.html>. The SHPO has information on any applicable state and federal funding programs or tax incentives credits for income-producing buildings, general information on the preservation of historic buildings, and nomination forms and guidelines for the National Register of Historic Places.

### **Statewide and Local Preservation Organizations**

Private statewide and local preservation groups serve as the network centers and representatives of preservation activities within their states. They work with SHPOs, assist local groups, intervene in preservation issues, advocate state membership and educational programs, issue publications, engage in real estate and revolving fund programs, and serve as a preservation clearinghouse. For the name, address, and phone number of your state's statewide preservation

organization, visit the National Trust's website at <http://www.preservationnation.org/resources/faq/historic-homes/shpo.html> or call the National Trust's Resource Center at (202) 588-6164.

### **National Register of Historic Places**

The National Register of Historic Places is the nation's official list of historically significant structures. The National Register was authorized under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and is administered by the Department of the Interior's National Park Service. Some of the types of properties nominated for inclusion in the National Register are historic areas in the National Park Service, National Historic Landmarks, historically significant properties nominated by federal, state, and local governments, organizations, or individuals. A National Register designation mandates that a property must be considered in the planning of federal or federally assisted projects impacting the registered property, and qualifies it for financial assistance from governmental funds for historic preservation when these funds are available.

For more information about the National Register of Historic Places, write to the National Park Service at P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013, or call the National Register's reference desk at 202-354-2213 or 354-2210. The National Register's web site is also a good place to find information, as it offers general information about the program, specific information about registered properties, guidelines for nominating properties, and publications about the National Register. The web address is <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/>; to go directly to the National Register's publication site, visit <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/publications/>; and to search for information about a specific property listed on the National Register, go to <http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/research/>. To determine whether a building is on the National Register, the following website has a searchable database of sites on the National Register: [www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com](http://www.nationalregisterofhistoricplaces.com).

### **Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation**

The philosophical principles in *The Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties with Guidelines for Preserving, Rehabilitating, Restoring, and Reconstructing Historic Buildings* have proven to be important in successful administration of historic districts. They are sometimes included in a preservation ordinance as part of the design review criteria, and other times are referenced in the ordinance as a required basis for developing local design guidelines. A few districts use the Standards for Rehabilitation by themselves as a general guideline without anything specific attached. Ultimately, *The Secretary of Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties* is an excellent resource for all work done on old buildings. These guidelines are used to determine whether the historic character of a building is preserved in the process of rehabilitation. The guidelines recommend responsible methods and approaches and list treatments that should be avoided. A copy can be obtained from your State Historic Preservation Officer, on-line at <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/standguide/index.htm>, or from the Government Printing Office, 941 North Capitol Street, NW, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 512-1800. For more information write to the National Park Service, Heritage Preservation Services-424, P.O. Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013-7127; or call (202) 513-7270.

### **Paint Colors**

Some local preservation ordinances restrict paint colors; some do not. The National Trust's "Paint in America: The Colors of Historic Buildings" by Roger Moss is available at:

[www.preservationbooks.org](http://www.preservationbooks.org). Moss has written several other books concerning historic paint colors, available at your local bookstore or library or through Amazon.com. The National Park Service's "Preservation Briefs" will also be helpful and can be accessed using this link: <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm>. Two particularly useful briefs are: "No.10 - Exterior Paint Problems on Historic Woodwork" and "No. 28 - Painting Historic Interiors."

### **Plaques for Historic Buildings**

Owners of local, state, or nationally registered buildings often mount a plaque on their property. A number of private companies manufacture suitable plaques. To avoid costly shipping charges, you may want to work with a foundry or engraving firm in your local area. Historic plaque companies advertise in *Preservation*, so be sure to look in the classified section for companies in your area. Consult with your State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and any local historical commission to find out if they have plaque programs. Your SHPO will also be able to tell you if your state has a special funding program to help with the cost of a plaque. Finally, and most importantly, be extremely careful when affixing the plaque to the historic building to avoid harming the building material. [See also the National Trust's "Plaques" information sheet #7]

### **Easements**

A preservation easement is a legal right granted by the owner of a property to an organization or a governmental entity qualified under state law to accept such an easement. It protects against undesirable development or indirect deterioration. Preservation easements may provide the most effective legal tool for the protection of privately-owned historic properties. The terms are generally incorporated into a recordable preservation easement deed and can prohibit, for example, alteration of the structure's significant features, changes in the usage of the building and land, or subdivision and topographic changes to the property. The property continues on the tax rolls at its current use designation rather than its "highest and best use" (its value if developed) thereby giving the owner a genuine tax advantage. For information on easement holders in your area, contact your SHPO or statewide or local preservation organization.

**The American Planning Association (APA)** endorses local survey and designation programs related to historic preservation through a sweeping policy that encourages government support and integration of preservation into local planning processes. Please visit the APA website to find case studies and other information on several planning/land use issues that may be of help to you: <http://www.planning.org/policyguides/index.htm>.

**Heritage Preservation Services** (a division of the National Park Service) provides services, advice, and publications on historic preservation, restoration, and rehabilitation technology. Their publications include *Preservation Briefs* covering such topics as masonry, mortar, conserving energy in historic buildings, cleaning and caring for historic buildings, and aluminum and vinyl siding. All briefs are available online at <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/briefs/presbhom.htm>. For more information about their publications, call (202) 513-7270. Their website, <http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/index.htm>, includes information on researching a historic building, applying the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, technical information, and other resources for restoration projects. HPS has also created an online tutorial on the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation called Electronic Rehab at [http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/online\\_ed.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/online_ed.htm). The program is designed for historic building owners, new members of design review and historic preservation commissions, architects, contractors, developers, maintenance personnel,

and students. The site also has a test where you make critical decisions about the appropriateness of rehabilitation work on two buildings and get immediate feedback. For more information, visit [http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/standards\\_guidelines.htm](http://www.nps.gov/history/hps/tps/standards_guidelines.htm).

### **Glossary of Preservation Terms**

- *Preserve* - To maintain a structure's existing form through careful maintenance and repair.
- *Reconstruct* - To re-create an historic building that has been damaged or destroyed; to erect a new structure resembling the old using historical, archaeological, architectural documents.
- *Rehabilitate* - To repair a structure and make it usable again while preserving those portions or features of the property that are historically and culturally significant. For example, rehabilitation might include an updated kitchen while retaining the historic stairwell and fireplaces. Most common approach for private houses.
- *Remodel* - To change a building without regard to its distinctive features or style. Often involves changing the appearance of a structure by removing or covering original details and substituting new materials and forms.
- *Renovate* - To repair a structure and make it usable again, without attempting to restore its historic appearance or duplicate original construction methods or material.
- *Restore* - To return a building to its form and condition as represented by a specified period of time using materials that are as similar as possible to the original materials.
- *Stabilize* - To protect a building from deterioration by making it structurally secure, while maintaining its current form.

**This is one of several information sheets on preservation related topics available from the National Trust's Resource Center. For a complete list of information sheets available, please send an email to [info@nthp.org](mailto:info@nthp.org). Related topics include:**

**Information sheet #1 – How to Preserve your Historic Home**

**Information sheet #2 – Historic Buildings**

**Information sheet #5 – The National Register of Historic Places**

**Information sheet #7 – Plaques for Historic Buildings and Homes**

**Information sheet #33 – Information for Realtors**

The National Trust for Historic Preservation provides this list of resources solely for informational and educational purposes. This is not intended as a specific recommendation or endorsement of any particular organization or entity.

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