

LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICTS: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is a local historic district?

A local historic district is an area in which the majority of residents have decided they want to keep the look and feel of the place they call “home” by adopting a local preservation ordinance, and then creating a local preservation commission to administer it. This local legislation is one of the best ways to protect the historic character of buildings, streetscapes, and neighborhoods from inappropriate alterations and incompatible new construction, as well as outright demolition. A local historic district does not freeze an area in time. Local historic districts are about guiding change and preserving community character as an area grows and evolves over time.

What are the advantages to owning property in a local historic district?

Historic districts encourage reinvestment. When you are part of an historic district, you have some certainty that any new construction or renovation activity will be respectful of the existing character of the community and its architecture. Historic district regulations are quality assurance standards, so that if you invest in your building, you are assured that your investment won't be negated by a thoughtless renovation next door. Real estate agents in many communities use historic district status as a marketing tool to sell properties, because buyers are assured that the aspects that make a particular area attractive will be protected over a period of time.

Local historic districts encourage better design. There is generally a greater sense of cohesion, more innovative use of materials, and greater public appeal within historic districts than in areas without historic designations.

Studies show that districts are a useful tool in stabilizing, even increasing property values and stimulating new investment. A community that values its history and architecture is generally one that is attractive to live and work in.

Finally, and less quantifiable, older buildings give us tangible links with our past. They tell stories of earlier times and become part of our lives. They are a record of ourselves and our communities. They provide a richness and depth to everyday life that cannot be replicated by new construction and is lost when renovated beyond recognition.

What are the disadvantages?

Many of the horror stories about historic districts are myths that circulate in communities that *don't* have a district. Once a district is adopted, criticism almost always dies down, as the realities and advantages of the district become evident. It is also important to remember that districts in New Hampshire follow New Hampshire laws and are administered by people in your own town.

For any district to be effective, it needs to be properly administered. Criticism often focuses on procedural due process and fair treatment. Additionally, there may be a perception that the regulations or design guidelines are not applied consistently. To help eliminate this, recognition that a historic district commission's role is both regulatory and educational should be advocated. The commission should provide information that helps property owners understand preservation issues and encourages them to be proper stewards of their historic resources. The more clear and carefully defined the standards are, the more the public will understand the standards and review process. Commission members should also receive regular training, so they can learn to visualize design alternatives and develop a more sound understanding of the theoretical issues in an abstract setting, rather than in the heat of community decision making.

Will my taxes go up?

Property taxes are tied to real estate values. Property taxes for buildings in historic districts are taxed no differently than those outside the district.

My town looks just fine the way it is – what is the value in having a historic district?

As population grows and development pressure increases, local citizens actually have less influence on how their communities evolve – unless there is some sort of local design review in place that oversees development. Historic districts have been used successfully throughout the country as a means to protect community character, and most vibrant towns have some form of historic design review in place. In New Hampshire alone, we have over 60 local historic districts in cities as large as Concord and Somersworth and towns as small as Canaan and Hancock.

Developers known for quality work frequently seek out properties in historic districts. They know up front what the ground rules are; their investment is protected; and there is an open public process already in place for reviewing site and building plans. They also recognize that history is an effective marketing tool. Creating an historic district is a way of singling out the special places within a town or city. It ensures that those unique attributes will remain for future generations. It prevents the gradual erosion of those places that help define those special places.

Any community that has an historic district and survey in process can apply for “certified local government” status. “CLGs” become part of a state network for sharing information and are able to apply for federal matching grants available only to CLGs. There are also tax advantages to rehabilitating buildings in historic districts for commercial purposes.

Do we really need more regulations? Isn't this just zoning in disguise?

Zoning regulates use; historic districts do not. Local historic districts also *do not* restrict the sale of the property, require improvements or restoration of the property, require approval for interior changes or alterations, prevent new construction within historic areas, or require approval for ordinary repair or maintenance.

Who will be making decisions once the district is in place?

Historic districts are administered by either an historic district commission or the heritage commission, and members are appointed in the same manner as other commissions. Ideally, a commission overseeing a district includes people with design experience, such as an architect, planner, landscape architect, and/or builder, as well as those with a demonstrated interest in local history.

The commission will use its own regulations as well as the historical survey of the properties within the district to guide its decisions. This survey will also provide useful information to property owners on the history and architectural character of their buildings, and will also help to develop design guidelines to assist both applicants and the commission in making decisions.

Am I going to be told what color I can paint my house?

Probably not. Most historic districts do not regulate paint color – or many other changes that are considered cosmetic and can be readily reversed. Historic districts that regulate paint color normally only do so upon the overwhelming desire of the residents within the district, and in many cases, the review is only advisory.

Is it going to cost me more now to make alterations to my property?

It shouldn't. Historic districts are not adopted to impose hardships on people. Nor do commissions insist that buildings be “restored” or become museum structures. The purpose of a district is to keep as much of the historic fabric as is feasible, and when alterations are necessary, that the underlying historic character of the building not be lost in the process.