

# ASSESSING YOUR LOCAL HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM

A preservation program exists within a broader community development and planning context. It should be well-coordinated with other initiatives, including housing, economic development and sustainability and it should match the political support that preservation enjoys locally.

When assessing the current preservation environment, consider other policies and tools that are in place. How the city's permit review process will interface with other parts of development review also is a key element.

You should be able to answer the following questions:

How does preservation fit into the broader vision for the community?

How does the preservation program relate to other policies and regulations in the community?

**In order to answer those questions. Following these steps in assessing your preservation program:**

## Step 1:

### Identify related community policies.

Note that many communities with historic preservation programs employ design review as a tool to manage the character of change that may occur, both for preservation of the historic resources themselves and also for directing new development in their context. This design review is most effective when it is a coordinated part of the comprehensive plan for the community, and related policies.

Development permitting for historic resources usually occurs in the context of a historic preservation ordinance that provides for design review. Sometimes the design guidelines are included as part of the law. Sometimes the guidelines are adopted through an administrative process after the ordinance is passed. Ideally, this

ordinance is based on policies defined in a preservation plan, which itself should be a component of the community's comprehensive plan.

Once you have reviewed the broader planning policies of the community, answer these questions:

### A. Does a comprehensive plan exist that may establish a policy for historic preservation?

A comprehensive plan may include these topics that relate to preservation:

- Housing**
- Economic development**
- Environmental policies**
- Transportation**
- Education**
- Health**
- Sustainability & energy conservation**

How will preservation help accomplish objectives of the comprehensive plan in these are other topics?

### B. How will the preservation program fit with other development regulations and policies?

Also review related city regulations: zoning ordinances, building codes, subdivision regulations and design review regulations should be studied to determine how the guidelines would relate to these laws. It is very important that potential conflicts be identified early in the process so they can be resolved, and coordination with city staff will be necessary.

Zoning ordinances may regulate:

- Types of land use**
- Lot assemblage**
- Parcel size**
- Density**
- Set-backs**
- Building height**
- Building orientation**

Some cities also provide for development review that includes key design variables. How will preservation review interface with these other steps should be a key consideration as well.

Some guidelines include policies that conventionally appear in zoning regulations. If such standards are included in the guidelines, be careful to coordinate them with similar regulations in the zoning ordinance itself, to avoid conflicting standards.

### **C. What is the political climate for the preservation program?**

The degree of support for preservation often correlates with public understanding of the benefits of preservation, and with its fit into broader policies:

What is level of awareness?  
 Is there an area of special concern?  
 What is the political support for preservation?  
 Will elected officials support the program?  
 Is additional education needed to build support?  
 Will property owners support design review?  
 How may the preservation program be tailored to reflect these values?

### **D. Who are the key players and stakeholders in the preservation program?**

Preservation is a community-wide effort that spans political camps and a spectrum of interest groups:

- The preservation commission
- Private preservation advocacy groups
- Property owners
- Neighborhood residents
- The development community

## **Step 2: Evaluate the preservation program components.**

Many communities organize their historic preservation programs as a series of interrelated tools, each of which contributes to the protection of cultural resources. While it is not essential to have all of these components in place, it is good to think about them as a coordinated package of policies and tools. When evaluating a preservation program, check to see which of these components are in place:

### **1. GOALS & OBJECTIVES**

These should be stated goals for the long-range character of the districts in the city as well as historic resources in general. They should also relate to other planning issues associated with the area. These may appear in the General Plan, in neighborhood plans, as well as design guidelines.

### **2. SURVEYS**

A formal identification of those properties considered to have historic significance is an essential tool. Ideally, this is developed in a professional, objective manner, and is formally adopted such that all parties understand how the property will be treated in development review permitting.

A survey identifies each of the historic resources in a district or as individual resources. It should include a description of the general character of the district, as well as a listing of all of the properties surveyed, indicating their significance.

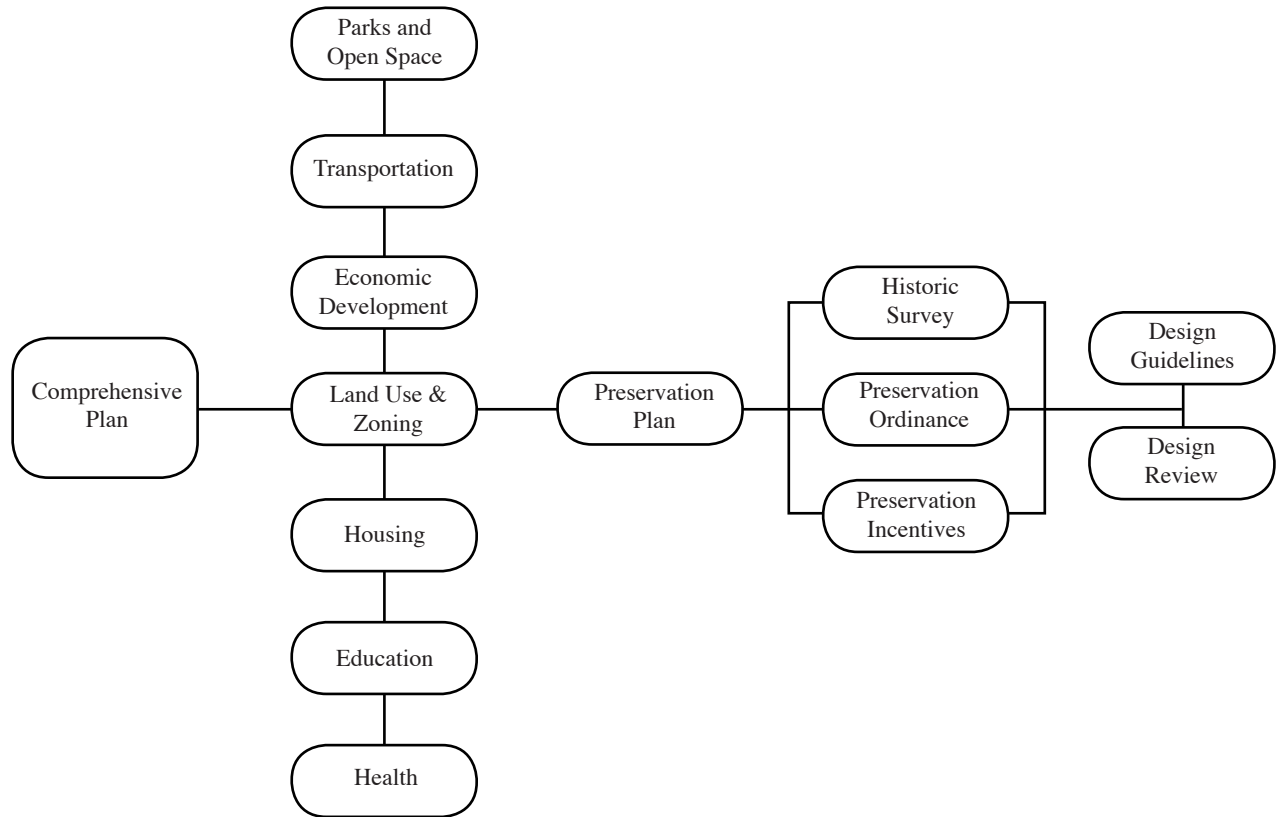
When reviewing proposed alterations to properties in the district, use the survey to determine if a property is "contributing," in which case guidelines for rehabilitation of historic structures will apply. If the structure is "noncontributing," then guidelines for new construction usually apply.

Some communities use a tiered survey that indicates varying levels of integrity for historic structures. Such a survey may also identify new buildings that are compatible with their context. More recently, communities have identified subordinate levels of significance, such as "structures of merit."

Some ordinances provide for varying levels of protection and review based on the category of significance that is used. This can help to balance the level of incentives and regulations that apply to different categories.

### **To what extent does the city's survey system provide advance notice to all parties about the significance of properties?**

## HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER COMMUNITY POLICIES



This chart illustrates a typical organization of community policies, which organizes historic preservation programs, including design review, as a part of a Preservation Plan that establishes goals for preservation and provides the theoretical basis for design review. This Preservation Plan is in turn a component

of community-wide land use and zoning policies, which combine with broader planning topics, such as Transportation, Health and Education, to form a Comprehensive Plan. Although your community may not have all of these planning components, consider this as a model for formal and informal policies that may exist.

### 3. LEGAL TOOLS

Legal tools define the limits and rights of review and establish the Historic Preservation Commission as the reviewing body. For example, state enabling legislation is needed to allow local governments to adopt powers of design review. At the community level, a city's historic preservation ordinance is usually established under the provisions of local zoning regulations. The ordinance may provide a process for designating historic properties as well as for the review of rehabilitation plans, and designs for new construction and demolition. Other legal tools may include preservation easements.

The "underlying" provisions of the base zoning for an area is also an important tool. Several communities are now re-considering the base zoning, in terms of building mass, scale and orientation to the street, in "form-based" coding. These provisions can accomplish some of the objectives of historic district designation and should be coordinated as such.

More recently, communities have added Conservation District designation as an option for certain areas of distinct character, and have provided similar designation options for individual properties outside of districts.

To what extent do the existing ordinances fit the needs of the community in offering a strategic system of preservation and conservation?

### 4. ADMINISTRATIVE AND REVIEW PROCEDURES

The means by which reviews occur is established in a set of procedures that define a uniform due process for all applicants to be heard in a similar manner. A written definition of procedures will include the submittal requirements, outlining the types of documentation that will be required for review. Other procedures will define the process for scheduling a hearing with the commission. Finally, provisions should exist for how the commission will conduct the meeting itself.

Preservation review procedures also must be coordinated with other permitting steps. As "design" has become a key consideration in all city permitting, there is now more risk that confusion, and even conflicts, can occur. Mapping review processes, and also considering how different boundaries for review may overlap are key aspects of considering a preservation system in the broader planning context.

### 5. DESIGN GUIDELINES

The heart of a design review system for historic resources is a document contains guidance for making informed, objective decisions about the appropriateness of any work that may be proposed. These "design guidelines" should be published and made available in advance for applicants while developing their designs. Ideally, the document will also reiterate the design goals for the district and the community.

Once established, guidelines become the community standards by which the design review board evaluates the appropriateness of proposed changes to the affected properties. The guidelines also inform developers in advance of the criteria with which their projects will be considered. Guidelines and the review process also play an educational role, increasing understanding and awareness of design issues in historic areas.

### 6. PRESERVATION INCENTIVES

Many communities provide incentives to stimulate investment in historic properties, encourage property owners to follow appropriate rehabilitation procedures, and even assist those with limited budgets. Even though preservation procedures can be less expensive than alternatives that would alter historic character, incentives strengthen any good preservation program.

Some communities offer financial assistance, in the form of loans or grants, to reduce rehabilitation costs to property owners. Others offer tax relief, either as income tax credits, sales tax waivers, or reduced property taxes. Others provide technical assistance, to facilitate appropriate rehabilitation techniques, while some communities provide streamlined review processes and offer special flexibility in building codes.

To what extent to the city's incentives match the needs and interests of the different types of property owners that may be affected by the preservation program?

### 7. EDUCATION & AWARENESS

Many property owners willingly comply with appropriate rehabilitation procedures and develop compatible designs for new construction when they are well-informed about preservation theory. Effective preservation programs, therefore, include special initiatives to educate property owners. Such programs include rehabilitation classes, publications and walking tours to heighten awareness and increase

understanding of preservation procedures and policies. Well-written design guidelines that provide useful information, as well as literal standards, also serve an educational role.

## 8. ENFORCEMENT MECHANISM

A weak link in many design review systems is enforcement of approved work. At the initial stage, regulations should clearly state that all relevant building permit applications require approval of the historic preservation commission. Ordinances should also clearly define the responsibility for monitoring construction to assure that it complies with the approved submittals. Finally, penalties for non-compliance must be prescribed. When planning the enforcement component, be realistic about the time commitments that may be required to monitor construction and determine if this will be handled by staff or if commission members will fulfill this role.

Some communities assign monitoring responsibilities to zoning code enforcement staff. Others use sub-committees of the preservation to conduct on-site visits during construction. These are typically timed to coincide with key milestones in normal construction inspections that are managed by the building code official.

## 9. SYSTEM MAINTENANCE

Preservation programs require on-going maintenance. They need continuing evaluation of the process and the results. Ideally, the preservation commission will review its actions on an annual basis to determine if adjustments in the system are necessary. Guidelines may be amended to respond to new development trends, procedures may be re-written to simplify review times and ordinances may be adjusted to clarify the powers of the commission. These suggestions should be summarized in an annual report

In addition to regular system reviews, the commission should stage an annual training session to hone its design review skills and provide orientation to new members. Also plan an annual study session with city council and the planning commission. It is essential to maintain an effective working relationship and to identify areas of concern.

This evaluation of existing preservation programs should help you determine the role you expect preservation to play in the community. Note that as a part of the evaluation, that you may also identify the need for other preservation strategies. For example, a more aggressive education program may be needed to build broader support for preservation. Be certain to take a realistic assessment and place preservation in context.

### Step 3:

#### **Craft a system improvement strategy.**

Using the information that you have collected in order to answer the preceding questions, craft a strategy for enhancing the system. Within each of the "tools" categories, identify areas of strength and success, as well as opportunities for improvement.

Conduct this assessment with a pro-active attitude, with an understanding room always exists for improving a program. Some actions may be quick fixes. Others will require more time, and ground work, to be realized.

It is also important to recognize that in some cases other programs may benefit from adjustments in order to better make use of preservation initiatives. Modifying energy codes to acknowledge historic buildings is an example.

The improvement strategy should:

- Describe specific actions, within defined system component categories.
- Establish a time line, in relative terms for accomplishing the improvements.
- Identify the key players who will participate in the improvements.
- Re-affirm how the community's basic preservation policies will be further strengthened by these improvements.