



City of Medford

HISTORICAL COMMISSION HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

City Hall – Room 308
85 George P. Hassett Drive
Medford, Massachusetts 02155

Frequently Asked Questions about Historic Districts

What is a historic district?

Historic districts in the United States are designated areas recognizing a single building, group of properties or sites by one of several entities on different levels as historically or architecturally significant. Historic districts may be created at the federal, state or local level. The U.S. federal government designates historic districts through the United States Department of the Interior under the auspices of the National Park Service. State-level historic districts follow a similar process. In both cases, they offer little or no protection for resources within their boundaries. Local historic district designations offer, by far, the most legal protection for historic properties because most land use decisions are made at the local level. Local districts are administered by the municipal government, in this case, the City of Medford.

How many historic districts are there in Medford?

There are currently two local historic districts: The Marm Simonds District and the Hillside Avenue Historic District, both established in 1985. In addition to the two local districts, there are two National Register districts: The Hillside Avenue Historic District and the Old Ship Street Area. Both were listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1975.

What is the difference between the two designations?

A listing on the National Register of Historic Places is primarily an honorary designation. It offers minimal protection from state or federally involved projects. There is no protection for demolition except for properties that qualify for review under the City's demolition delay bylaw. The local historic district designation is a much stronger tool to preserve the character of the neighborhood or resource by requiring review of any exterior changes visible from a public right of way.

How is a local historic district created?

A local historic district begins with a meeting of property owners and residents to find out what they think. If there is interest in creating a district, the Historic District Commission acts as a study committee to investigate and prepare a report documenting further study. 16 Foster Court has been subject to demolition delay review which involved a public meeting, public hearing and extensive research by the Historical Commission. This forms the basis for the study committee to define a need. A study report is created to report on findings and presented at an official public hearing. The final step is passage of the historic district bylaw by a two-thirds majority vote of City Council.

What kinds of things are reviewed by the Historic District Commission?

Exterior architectural features visible from a public right of way are reviewed. Among the types of alterations that will be reviewed for appropriateness to the property and the district are:

- § Exterior remodeling, additions.
- § Demolition of any structure.
- § Siding, moldings, columns and trim material.
- § Doors and windows, shutters.

- §Roofing and gutters.
- §Chimneys and brickwork.
- §Fences and gates.
- §Accessory structures such as sheds and garages.
- §Equipment such as A/C condensers, satellite dishes, antennas.
- §Permanent and temporary signs and signs in windows visible from the street.
- §Stone walls, retaining walls.

There are a number of exemptions for review and these include:

- §Landscaping involving plants, trees, or shrubs.
- §Walkways and terraces significantly at grade.
- §Paint colors.
- §Storm windows and storm doors.
- §Attached exterior lighting fixtures.
- §Work not visible from a public right of way.
- §Reconstruction work using materials similar to the original following disaster.
- §Work where no exterior architectural features are involved.

A more complete definition of reviewable and exempt items are included as an attachment to the study report. These will remain the same.

Does this mean I can't paint my house any color I want?

While some local historic districts in Massachusetts do review paint colors, we are NOT recommending including any paint color review in this district. The Commission currently does not have this review in any of its current districts.

What are the advantages of a local historic district?

Historic districts encourage reinvestment. When you are part of a 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 your investments won't be negated by a thoughtless renovation in another location. 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 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 a tangible link 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. Medford has less than 3,000 buildings constructed before 1900 and both the Historical Commission and District Commission believe these are priority. They are rare and diminishing through demolitions and alteration. It is important that we take the first step to turning the conversation toward conservation and re-use.

What are the disadvantages?

Many stakeholders hear horror stories and myths regarding local districts, their creation and administration. Many of these originate in places 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. These follow defined law laid out at the State and local level and are administered by people in our city.

In our opinion, there are few disadvantages beyond adding a single step to getting your construction permit. The rules are clearly defined and members are available to guide your project through the approval channels. Members are trained and adhere to guidelines and open meeting law. These set the basis for a good administration. Teamwork and cooperation between the Chair, members and the application will streamline the process.

Who are members of the Historic District Commission?

The Medford Historic District Commission is currently made up of 5 members and 2 alternates who are appointed by the Mayor. They represent homeowners, tenants, and neighbors of the districts themselves and have certain skills relevant to historic preservation. These commonly include architects, realtors, attorney and those interested in our local history. The District Commission encourages interested individuals to apply for a seat on the board. There are currently open positions.

How does the Commission make its decisions?

The commission will use the inventory of historic resources created by the Historical Commission and included in the Study Report to guide their decisions. The survey provides useful existing condition information as well as historical and architectural data. Existing guidelines will form the basis for quality control. The process is defined in the following question.

If my building was located in a historic district and I was constructing an addition or proposing change, what would I have to do?

Before acquiring a building permit for your addition, you would fill out an application to the Historic District Commission. The Commission would hold a public hearing and review the proposed plans to make sure they are appropriate changes to the historic district. If the addition was appropriate, the District Commission would issue a certificate of appropriateness. You would present this to the Building Inspector to get your permit. If the addition was found not appropriate, the Commission will explain the steps necessary to resubmit and how to improve your application. Applicants can appeal on the grounds of hardship but must submit evidence backing their position. Projects that are deemed detrimental to the preservation efforts of the district are seldom approved. We encourage homeowners to make change in a positive direction.

If my house is included in the local historic district, does that mean I need to make it look more historic?

No, you can maintain the current look of your house as long as you would like. A local historic district only reviews proposed changes to exterior architectural features. Routine maintenance of your house is exempt from review.

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 the 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.

Can the Historic District Commission require me to make costly repairs to my home that I can't afford? For instance, if my home has a slate roof and I can't afford to replace it with slate, what will happen?

The Medford Historic District Commission understands that maintaining an older building with all original materials can be costly. In all cases, the Commission will work with the owner to identify historically appropriate alternative materials when replacing the original is cost prohibitive. In those cases, a Certificate of Hardship may be issued but first requires a denial of a Certificate of Appropriateness. The Historic District Commission encourages applicants to apply for Community Preservation Funding to tap into the Historic Preservation allocation. All buildings within the local historic districts have a public benefit and would possibly qualify for a grant depending on the scope of work.

Isn't this just another level of bureaucracy?

While it is true that an additional step is needed for some projects, the benefits of protecting our rich architectural heritage outweighs the inconvenience. The Commission is not seeking to halt change or development but rather have a constructive dialogue on how we can make sure it matches the character of the existing building and the neighborhood contexts. Without a local historic district, the building could be demolished or irreparably altered at any time once the demolition delay expires.

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 district bounds (although it is reviewable), or require approval for ordinary repair and maintenance.

What will happen to the value of my property if a local historic district is established?

No one can predict the future but studies around the country suggest that property values stay the same or increase faster in local historic districts compared to similar, non-designated areas.

Will my taxes go up?

Property taxes are tied to real estate values. Properties in a local historic district are taxed no differently than those outside the district.

If I and my neighbors already maintain our properties, why do we need a local historic district?

By having a local historic district, you can be assured of stability. The existing or new property owners of the buildings within the district will be required to maintain, preserve or improve the property in a way that is not detrimental to the entire neighborhood. Single-property districts do work to stabilize the neighborhood, despite encompassing one property.

Medford looks fine the way it is – what is the value of having a new historic district?

As population grows and development pressure increases, local citizens actually have less influence on how their community evolves, unless there is some sort of local design review in place. Currently, Medford does not have this and we do not imagine this will happen in the future. Historic districts have been used successfully to protect community character, and most vibrant towns have some form of historic designation in place. In Medford, there are two local districts. There are some 200 districts across Massachusetts.

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 process already in place for reviewing site and building plans. They also recognize that history is an effective marketing tool. Creating a historic district is a way of singling out the special places within our city. It ensures that those unique attributes will remain for future generations. It prevents the gradual erosion of those icons that help define our sense of place.

As a community with a local historic district, we have been designated a Certified Local Government by State and Federal authorities. This gives us matching grant funds for survey projects. Forms and reports created by consultants utilized CLG funds administered by the Historic Commission. There might also be tax advantages to rehabilitating historic buildings. Finally, we encourage owners and developers to tap into the preservation funding awarded by the Community Preservation Commission. They are required to pass through these tax dollars for projects with a public benefit. Preservation and restoration might qualify if framed in the appropriate way.

Are there environmental impacts for historic districts? I am trying to be green by installing energy efficient products such as windows and doors.

Local historic districts help the environment because they encourage communities to retain and use their existing resources in established neighborhoods. This reduces the need for cars, cuts back on pollution and congestion, and eliminates landfill waste.

In addition, local districts are energy efficient. Many older buildings were designated with energy conservation in mind, taking advantage of natural light, cross-ventilation, and climate-appropriate materials. Preservation commissions are also increasingly improving their design guidelines to make it easier on homeowners to use renewable-energy technologies. Solar, for example, can already be found in the district.