



## DESIGNED FOR

- historic property owners
- new members of district commissions
- community officials
- design professionals
- architects and developers

**Bringing preservation “home”** What do some 2,300 local historic districts have in common? In each one, a majority of its residents have decided they want to keep the look and feel of the place they call “home” by adopting a local preservation ordinance, then creating a local preservation commission to administer it. Local legislation is one of the best ways to protect the historic character of buildings, streetscapes, neighborhoods, and special landmarks from inappropriate alterations, new construction, and other poorly conceived work, as well as outright demolition.

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## PEOPLE PROTECTING COMMUNITY RESOURCES

### Defining Historic Districts

" Local historic districts are areas in which historic buildings and their settings are protected by public review. Historic district ordinances are local laws that are adopted by communities using powers granted by the state. Historic districts comprise the city's significant historic and architectural resources. Inclusion in a historic district signifies that a property contributes to an ensemble that is worth protecting by virtue of its historic importance or architectural quality..." *City of Cambridge, Massachusetts.*

**What is a local historic district?** Beyond a general description, it's best to go directly to the source—the local governments and communities that create and care for historic districts. Although there are many legal and administrative similarities to historic districts, at the heart of it, each historic district defines itself differently—and should! Each district across the country has a special story and unique personality. Consider these examples:

***In Seattle, Washington, Pike's Place Market Historical District*** was rescued from an urban renewal project in 1971 and subsequently listed as both a local and National Register Historic District. "Today, it is a healthy, bustling community of merchants and residents."

**Raleigh, North Carolina designated Oakwood** as its first "local historic district" in 1975 to ensure the long-term protection of this diverse collection of 19th and early 20th century residences. As part of the local historic district designation, the design of all proposed exterior change is reviewed by the Raleigh Historic Districts Commission.

***In San Diego, California, the Gaslamp Quarter Historic District*** retains the unique turn of the century architectural character of the area, encouraging pedestrian-oriented uses, such as shops, restaurants, galleries, street vendors, and cultural facilities. Preserving the richness of the past and providing continuity with current and future development are dual planning goals of the local historic district. It is also listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

**Why local design review?** Many towns, cities, and counties nationwide have already said "yes" to local historic district designation. More than 2,300 districts have historic preservation commissions that conduct design review and many such commissions work with multiple districts in their local jurisdictions! Why are the number of historic districts growing yearly? Residents know that their historic districts are far more than attractive places for tourists to visit, shop, and perhaps have lunch. Residents know that one of the best ways to keep the look and feel of the place they call "home" is through a local design review process.

This is the National Register definition: "A district possesses a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of sites, buildings, structures, or objects united historically or aesthetically by plan or physical development.". (How to Apply the National Register Criteria for Evaluation, p. 5)

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### Early Models

Local historic districts are one of the oldest and strongest forms of protection for historic properties. The historic district movement began in the United States in 1931, when the **City of Charleston, South Carolina**, enacted a local ordinance designating an "**Old and Historic District**" administered by a Board of Architectural Review. This early ordinance said that no changes could be made to exterior architectural features that were subject to view from a public street or way.

Following a 1936 amendment to the Louisiana Constitution, the Vieux Carre Commission was created in 1937 to protect and preserve the **French Quarter in New Orleans**. The City passed a local ordinance that set standards to regulate changes there.

*In 1939, San Antonio, Texas adopted an ordinance to protect La Villita, the original Mexican village marketplace. In 1950 the U.S. Congress enacted legislation to protect the Georgetown neighborhood in Washington, D.C. . By 1965, 51 communities nationwide had enacted preservation ordinances.*

Today, some 60 years later, over 2,300 U.S. communities have adopted preservation ordinances and the list is growing. These are just a few of the earliest models for local protection of historic areas. They represent those pioneering preservationists who led the movement that is now mainstream.

Excerpts from A Guidebook for Historic District Commissions, Massachusetts Historical Commission, 1998, and Design Review in Historic Districts, Rachel S. Cox, National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1997.

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### Strengths of Local Listing

**"Experienced preservationists know that historic districts are preserved and enhanced through small steps, carefully taken. They know that the collective integrity of individual buildings imparts a distinct local identity, especially if they are complemented by street trees and landscaping, intact sidewalks, and flexible zoning that respects the historic geometry and function of existing neighborhoods... To achieve this goal, however, they must do more than rely on state and federal preservation laws...Historic district preservation usually occurs locally, beyond the scope of state and federal legislation. Erik Nelson, Senior Preservation Planner, City of Fredericksburg, VA**

**"The primary strength of a local designation is that it can be tailored to specific community needs and provides greater protection for local resources." City of Prescott, Arizona, Master Plan, 1997.**

Does listing in the National Register mean that your house and neighborhood or city's main street will be protected from time and change—forever preserved? Many people think so, and this is a common misunderstanding. While National Register listing is a tremendous honor and carries some financial opportunities as well, "Under federal law, owners of private property listed in the National Register are free to maintain, manage, or dispose of their property as they choose, provided that there is no Federal involvement." *Quote from the National Register of Historic Places.*

As opposed to the more honorary National Register listing and federal or state law, local designation can be a first step toward legally preserving historic landmarks, neighborhoods and downtown areas in your community. So, although private property owners do have rights under any type of listing or designation, it's important to be aware of what those rights really are—and how effectively administered local laws, in particular, may work to protect the character of your neighborhood.

**NOTE** the basic differences in protection and requirements between local designation and National Register listing:

#### **Local Designation (as part of a historic preservation ordinance)**

- Designates historic properties on the basis of *local criteria and local procedures*.
- Sets boundaries based on the distribution pattern of *historic properties, and other community considerations*.
- Provides recognition of a *community's significant properties*.
- Coupled with a design review process, such as a historic preservation commission or architectural review board, *provides protection of character-defining exterior features* of a property, but, in many cases, not historic interiors or archaeological sites.
- *May qualify a property for a form of financial assistance*, such as a local tax incentive for historic preservation, if the local government has passed a tax incentives ordinance.

- *Can provide for review of proposed demolitions within the district, and provide delays to allow for preservation alternatives to be considered.*

- *Can require local commission review and approval for all changes to the exterior appearance of historic properties, and review approval for all new construction, such as infill, e.g., adjacent new buildings on a site or on vacant parcels.*

### **National Register Listing (as an honorary status with some federal financial incentives)**

- Designates historic properties based on uniform national criteria and procedures.

- *Sets boundaries for historic districts based on the actual distribution pattern of intact historic properties in the area.*

- *Provides recognition by the federal government that an area has historical or archeological significance.*

- Requires the effects of federally assisted work projects (actions) on historic properties be considered prior to the commencement of work. Makes available *federal tax incentives* for qualified rehabilitation projects. Requires conformance to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation (36 CFR 67).

- *Makes a property eligible for HPF pre-development planning grants (such as plans and specs) and also "bricks and mortar" repair grants, if selected by the SHPO for grant assistance. Work projects require conformance to the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for the Treatment of Historic Properties (36 CFR 68).*

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## **PEOPLE PROTECTING COMMUNITY RESOURCES**

### **Summary of Benefits**

"Development that enhances the character of our historic districts is encouraged. We recognize that change is an important element in the city's evolution, an indicator of a healthy, vital neighborhood, and reflects the pride of residents in their community." Dan Becker, Executive Director Raleigh Historic Districts Commission, Raleigh, North Carolina.

### **Benefits of Local Historic Districts**

- 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 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.

Excerpted and adapted from *Maintaining Community Character: How to Establish a Local Historic District* by Pratt Cassity. National Trust for Historic Preservation. 2000.