

HISTORIC DISTRICTS: WHAT? WHY? HOW?

What is a historic district?

New Hampshire law permits communities to designate "historic districts" and to establish commissions to regulate construction activities within their boundaries. More than 80 of New Hampshire's 234 municipalities have locally designated historic districts.

Each of these 80+ towns has appointed a historic district commission and/or a heritage commission. A heritage commission, similar to a conservation commission, has an advisory role and is authorized to survey historic structures and sites within the Town. Their duties may be combined with the historic district commission which administers the historic district ordinance, regulations and guidelines within the historic district.

Local historic districts should not be confused with (but may be coterminous with) districts recognized by the National Register of Historic Places, a federal program which has minimal regulatory implication.

Why historic districts?

In the 1960s there was pressure to demolish whole neighborhoods deemed to be deteriorated. This program, known as "urban renewal", along with clearing of slums, resulted in destruction of the historic fabric of many urban communities. One of the most threatened in New Hampshire was the City of Portsmouth. To give communities the tools to counter this wave of thoughtless destruction, the legislature authorized municipalities to establish historic districts and to appoint historic district commissions to administer them.

How do historic districts work?

The statute allows municipalities to identify and preserve the architectural integrity of sections of Town felt to represent the historic identity of the community.

Most historic districts are "overlays" to the zoning ordinance. Uses allowed in the underlying zoning district are permitted, but must conform in appearance to the character of the district. Thus, for example, commercial business may be permitted by the zoning ordinance, but the structure and its surroundings must be compatible with the requirements of the historic district ordinance and regulations.

Why might all of this be important to you?

Suppose you are considering buying property in a historic district? What will this designation mean to you?

Were you attracted to the particular property because of the ambience of the area? If so, the fact that it is in a historic district would reassure you that the character of the neighborhood would likely be maintained.

If you are considering developing or significantly altering the property, you will want to research the restrictions of the historic district as well as the underlying zoning ordinance.

To better understand the implications for your property, you should obtain a copy of the Town's historic district ordinance, regulations and guidelines. It would be wise to attend a meeting of the historic district commission and get acquainted with the members and the activities of the board. Especially if you are contemplating changes in the use of or structure on the property, thorough research in advance of any commitment to purchase will affect your decision, and may save you from unpleasant surprises in the long run.

Want more information? A manual published by the New Hampshire Preservation Alliance entitled *Preserving Community Character, A Preservation Planning Handbook for New Hampshire* provides extensive information on historic districting, its history and implementation. It is available from the Alliance at their offices in Eagle Square in Concord, 603-224-2281 or www.nhpreservation.org.