

Neighborhood Heritage Districts, an innovative zoning tool

by Carolyn W. Baldwin

For many people the “neighborhood” is a special place. Physically, neighborhoods are characterized by a cohesiveness of their architecture and the uses of the buildings and open spaces. Many communities have designated “historic districts” where new construction and alteration to existing structures are regulated to provide conformity to the existing historic character of an area. But New Hampshire has only recently recognized a zoning tool that allows for less stringent control in neighborhoods which may not, technically, be historic, or where the residents and property owners may wish to maintain the character of the neighborhood although without the detailed regulation contemplated in formally designated historic districts..

In 2008 the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources sponsored preparation of a handbook designed to assist communities and interested citizens in developing a zoning provision to protect the integrity and character of particular neighborhoods. It is designed as an “innovative zoning” tool under the provisions of RSA 674:21, a statute specifically written to allow communities to tailor zoning provisions to meet their needs.

The concept is to allow a town to designate an area as a *neighborhood heritage district*. While the planning board is the body charged with administering the regulations, it does so with the advice of a neighborhood advisory committee. Use restrictions may be controlled within the district, or it may be an “overlay” district where uses are controlled through an underlying zoning district such as “commercial” or “residential”. A neighborhood heritage district may be entirely residential, or may provide for mixed uses. The object is to maintain the character and integrity of the district, and avoid intrusion by uses or structures that are incompatible. Thus regulations may address the size and design of new buildings and significant additions or alterations of existing structures, as well as the uses established in the district.

Historic Preservationist Elizabeth Durfee Hengen and Attorney Carolyn Baldwin researched similar neighborhood preservation tools in other states. With the advice of a steering committee composed of planners, community leaders and other consultants, they produced a detailed handbook to guide interested communities through the process.

Go to the following link to see the publication.

[http://www.nh.gov/nhdhr/publications/documents/NHNeighborhoodHeritageDistrictsHandbook.](http://www.nh.gov/nhdhr/publications/documents/NHNeighborhoodHeritageDistrictsHandbook)