

City of Portland
Department of Planning and Development
Historic Preservation Office



About the City of Portland's Historic Preservation Program

In 1990, the City of Portland adopted a historic preservation ordinance to recognize and preserve one of the city's major assets—its rich collection of historic buildings, neighborhoods and landscapes. To date, 11 local historic districts, 5 historic landscape districts and 110 individual landmarks have been designated by the Portland City Council, protecting historic properties in neighborhoods as diverse as the Old Port, Stroudwater, Congress Street, the West End, and House Island.

The intent of historic district designation is not to prevent change, but to thoughtfully manage it so that the unique, identifiable character of each of the designated neighborhoods is retained over time. "Contributing" and landmark buildings within the district are protected from demolition, proposed alterations and additions are reviewed to ensure compatibility with the property's historic character, and new infill construction proposals are reviewed by a board whose members have demonstrated expertise and/or experience in architecture, historic preservation, or neighborhood conservation.

Frequently Asked Questions about Local Historic Districts

How are historic districts established? *Designation of a local historic district follows a detailed process of documentation, analysis and public review. First, a survey of existing structures within a defined study area is conducted to determine the relative "preservation value" of individual buildings. Based on the findings of the survey, draft historic district boundaries are delineated. Each building within the proposed boundaries is then thoroughly documented and a classification of "landmark", "contributing" or "noncontributing" is assigned to it. A report on the significance and visual character of the overall district is also prepared. Throughout this preliminary stage, there is public outreach to property owners in the affected area to answer questions and receive feedback. Once the necessary documentation work is completed, the proposed district is formally reviewed by the Historic Preservation Board, the Planning Board and ultimately the City Council. Notices are sent prior to every meeting and public comment is invited throughout the designation process.*

Are all buildings within a local historic district necessarily historic? *No. Within the boundaries of any historic district, some buildings do not contribute to the qualities that give the district its historic or architectural significance. These may have been built within the last 50 years or been so altered that the overall integrity of the building has been lost. These buildings are identified as "noncontributing" when the district is established and may be demolished as-of-right.*

Can a building in a local historic district be demolished? *Buildings classified as noncontributing structures may be demolished without review. To demolish a contributing or landmark structure, the property owner is required to demonstrate there is no reasonable use of the property or request reconsideration of the building's original classification based on information not known at the time of its original classification.*

Will inclusion in a local historic district prevent me from making changes to my property?

No. It is understood that buildings sometimes need to be modified or expanded to meet changing needs or the desires of occupants. The question is not whether you can add to an existing building, but how. In reviewing a proposed alteration or addition, the architectural characteristics of the existing building are considered as well as the ordinance review standards. Additions do not have to duplicate the original style and materials, but must be compatible in massing, scale, proportion and other key visual characteristics.

Will I have to fix up my building if it is included in a local historic district? *No. The ordinance does not require that owners rehabilitate their building or reverse any previous work.*

What types of building activities require review in historic districts? *Ordinary maintenance or replacement-in-kind does not require review, nor does changing a building's paint color. Exterior or site alterations (e.g. installing a new driveway) that will be readily visible from a public way require advance review and approval. Similarly, additions and new construction require review. A call to historic preservation staff can confirm whether the work requires review.*

Does every application need to be reviewed by the Historic Preservation Board? *No. Routine or minor alterations, such as porch or window replacement, are typically reviewed and approved by staff. In 2017, 70% of all applications were approved administratively.*

Where can I go for help in developing a proposal for alterations that will be appropriate for my property? *Staff are available for consultation as you develop your plans and often meet with applicants on site to get a better understanding of existing conditions and the owner's goals. Staff's role is to help guide applicants toward a solution that will meet ordinance standards.*

Will I have to hire an architect for my proposed alteration? *Many projects do not require an architect. Larger or more complicated projects such as building additions or new construction usually call for a design professional.*

Can new buildings be constructed in a local historic district? *Yes, on undeveloped lots and on lots where noncontributing buildings have been removed.*

Do new buildings need to match closely the historic buildings around it? *The historic preservation ordinance's new construction standards encourage contemporary design, however new buildings must also relate to key visual characteristics of the surrounding development.*

How do I apply for approval and is there a fee? *You can apply on line. If your project also requires a building permit, you can file one application for both reviews. The fee structure is based on the scale of the project. The application fee for small, staff-reviewed projects is \$65. The fee for Historic Preservation Board review is typically \$125, except for large-scale, major projects.*