

Historic Preservation Frequently Asked Questions

1. How will historic designation affect the time it takes to get a permit for home improvement?

The time required for the preservation review of a home improvement permit varies depending on the size and scope of the proposed work. Repair and in-kind replacement permits for residential work can typically be reviewed and approved by HPO within one day. Small additions (less than 500 square feet in size) can also be approved by HPO administratively, typically within 3-5 days. Larger additions (greater than 500 square feet) require submission for review by the Historic Preservation Review Board, which meets twice each month.

The HPO staffs a review desk at the Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs' (DCRA) Permit Center. If your building is in a historic district, the permit office will direct the permit seeker to the HPO desk for review. The HPO staff will need photographs of the property, drawings and/or a narrative scope of what work is proposed. If the project needs to be filed for HPRB review, a filing application will be provided and can be submitted at the HPO desk.

For more information on the permit review process including a list of work that is exempt from permit requirements and anticipated review times for work that does, please see:

<http://planning.dc.gov/page/permits-and-design-review>

2. If an ANC sponsors historic designation for a community, how long will it take for historic district rules to be implemented?

The preparation of a nomination could take about six months at a minimum. It is then submitted to the HPO for scheduling and presentation to the HPRB. If an ANC sponsors a nomination for historic district designation, the normally required filing fee of \$1000 is waived. Consideration by the HPRB might well take another three to four months to schedule. The HPRB generally makes its decision at the same meeting that the nomination is presented. Its approval and the HPO's subsequent recommendation for inclusion on the National Register currently mark the beginning of protection and the requirements derived there from.

3. What are the actual rules regarding alterations to the facade of the house?

As stipulated in the city's preservation law, the purpose of reviewing alterations in an historic district are to: 1) ensure that the important original features and characteristics of a property are retained; 2) that alterations are compatible in character, materials, workmanship and design with the property and historic district, and 3) to encourage their adaptation for contemporary use. For rowhouse neighborhoods, where the important design qualities of most buildings are concentrated on the front façade (or side elevations of a corner property), alterations are

typically limited to repair, in-kind replacement or relatively minor work rather than major changes that would substantially alter the property's appearance and relationship to neighboring properties. More substantial alterations and additions can be approved on rear elevations where they do not affect the important designed characteristics of the property or the district, if they are compatible in general size and character.

The HPRB has adopted design guidelines that provide more detailed information on many types of alterations and additions: <http://planning.dc.gov/page/design-guidelines>

4. Will existing buildings be "grandfathered" into the historic district so that owners won't have to change existing structures (e.g. tree boxes aren't all the same; vinyl windows on some homes and not on others)?

Yes. There is no requirement to change any existing work when a district is designated. Only new work is subject to review once the designation takes effect.

5. Will homeowners be allowed to add a floor or additional levels to their home?

In most cases, adding an additional floor on top of an historic building has been determined by the HPRB to be inconsistent with the purposes of the preservation law, as they change the character, height, mass and roofline of the property. Small roof decks may be compatible if they are designed to be not at all visible from public street views and should be located only on the rear portion of a property.

6. What is the relationship between the DCRA and the Office of Planning/Historic Preservation?

DCRA issues building and construction permits. Permits are required for new construction, demolition, additions, alterations and repair, retaining walls, fences, sheds, awnings, signs and other types of work in a historic district. These types of applications require historic review. That review is undertaken by HPO, a division of the Office of Planning. The HPRB has delegated authority for approval of minor work to HPO staff which may immediately sign off on many types of work. A permit for work on a historic landmark or property in a historic district is initiated at DCRA but cannot ultimately be issued without approval from HPO/HPRB. It should be noted that HPO is only one of the agencies that must review a permit application. Conformance with preservation principles is reviewed just as is compliance with zoning regulations and building codes.

7. What financial incentives are available for people to bring their homes up to code with respect to Historic Preservation?

There are currently no local tax credits or subsidies for owners to bring their homes "up to code" nor are there requirements that work be done on a property when it is designated historic. The city has a grant program, administered by HPO, that provides grants of up to \$25,000 (\$35,000 in the Anacostia Historic District) for low and moderate income homeowners in specific historic districts who wish to rehabilitate their homes. For more information on the Historic Homeowner Grant Program, please see:

<http://planning.dc.gov/service/homeowner-grants-applications>

8. What are the tax rules governing historic renovations (e.g. write off benefits and any negatives)?

Property within an historic district used for income-producing purposes may qualify for federal rehabilitation tax credits. An owner may receive a credit equivalent to 10 or 20 percent of certified rehabilitation costs depending on whether the building is historic or not. For more information, visit www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/tax/incentives/index.htm. Homeowners in the historic district may also qualify for the federal facade easement program through which the right to determine how the exterior may be altered is donated to a non-profit trust in perpetuity in exchange for a one-time tax deduction. There are several conservation easements organizations in the area that will answer specific questions including The L'Enfant Trust at 202-483-4880 or www.lenfant.org.

9. How has becoming a historic district affected other neighborhoods with respect to property tax assessments? The primary concern is a larger than usual increase.

According to recent information from the assessment office, property values in all areas of DC have increased. However, assessments appear to have no measurable relationship to historic designation.

10. If residents don't want historic designation, will the Historic Preservation Review Board designate/approve anyway?

The Historic Preservation Review Board makes the decisions on historic district designation, but such designation does not officially take place until the State Historic Preservation Officer makes a formal determination to forward the nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. There will never be unanimity in a neighborhood on the subject of historic designation. Prior to scheduling a hearing, the HPO and HPRB will want to ensure that there has been sufficient opportunity for public discussion of a nomination, and that there are expressions of broad-based community support.

Other Frequently Asked Questions

11. Can I paint my house any color I want?

Yes. The preservation law does not control paint color.

12. Can I landscape the way I want?

Yes. The preservation law does not control landscaping. It does, however, include review of "hardscape," including lead walks, driveways, retaining walls, etc.

13. Will I have to remove or change whatever is currently done to exterior once my community becomes a historic district?

No. The Historic Preservation law is not retroactive; there is no requirement that people remove or improve prior alterations.

14. Can I put air conditioning units in the front windows?

Yes. That does not require a building permit and thus, does not trigger review under the preservation law.

15. Can I install security bars or a storm door?

Yes. Security bars, storm doors and storm windows do not require a building permit.

16. Am I required to use special ("original") materials to repair, renovate my house?

Generally, the original types of materials are appropriate. For example, if a neighborhood is characterized principally by wood frame houses, wood siding would be appropriate on the historic houses (with fiber cement board acceptable on rear elevations, additions and garages), wood windows on elevations of the building that are prominently visible from the street (with other materials, including vinyl, acceptable on the rear). Front yard fences should be iron rather than vinyl or aluminum.