

Summary Notes

Historic Resources Code Project Roundtable III:

“What’s Working and What’s Not in Portland’s Historic Districts”

Wednesday, January 24, 6:00pm-7:30pm

Taborspace, 5441 SE Belmont St.

On Wednesday, January 24, 2018, the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability held its third roundtable for the Historic Resources Code Project (HRCP) in the Mt. Tabor Presbyterian Church facilities. The third in a series of four initial input sessions, this roundtable collected public comment surrounding Portland’s management of historic districts. Changes to Oregon Administrative Rules have altered how the City of Portland designates and protects the resources in these historic districts, allowing an opportunity to review and revamp existing processes within federal and state parameters. Approximately sixty Portlanders took part in the evening’s discussions.

Project manager Brandon Spencer-Hartle opened the event with a summary of the city’s current approach to managing National Register historic districts. He profiled three Portland Historic Districts—Kenton, Ladd’s Addition, and New Chinatown/Japantown—and described both the nomination process and the regulations that have traditionally accompanied historic district status. Staff noted the importance of improving the tools used to manage historic districts to better align processes and rules with the community values specified in Portland’s 2035 Comprehensive Plan.

Following the introductory presentation, participants were asked to write initial answers to the roundtable’s fundamental question: *What’s working, and what’s not, in Portland’s National Register Historic Districts?* After writing their comments on post-it notes, participants affixed these to poster boards categorized by the topics “Designation,” “Alterations and Additions,” “Demolition,” “New Construction,” and “Community Benefit.”

With these five issues to frame their discussions, roundtable participants divided into three breakout groups facilitated by Bureau of Planning and Sustainability and/or Bureau of Development Services staff. Conversations ranged widely and represented the broad range of participant interests. Common themes that emerged were the preservation of the built environment, housing affordability in historic districts, the pressure for increased density, and sustainability concerns. Staff recorded commentary on large notepads, which are transcribed below.

After the forty-minute breakout session, all participants reconvened to share a summary of their group discussions. Concerns with the designation process were mentioned frequently, with participants recommending a clarification of “consent” and a more direct process for collecting votes both for and against a district nomination. Other conversations addressed alterations and additions in historic districts, suggesting that certain projects be exempt from review, or that the type and cost of review be reduced; solar panels and shingles, seismic strapping, second entries, and alterations to a rear elevation were common examples. Many participants voiced support for demolition review, which currently applies to buildings in National Register historic districts, but many were also concerned with the constraints imposed on new construction within these districts. Some attendees felt that review of new construction unnecessarily inhibits housing growth, while others held that review ensures quality design

in keeping with the unique patterns present in historic districts. In response to these concerns, some participants advocated for the development of district-specific guidelines that inform new construction and regulate alterations on existing resources.

At the event's conclusion, participants were afforded another opportunity to provide comments in their own words. Each person was provided an additional post-it note and encouraged to leave an additional thought or comment concerning "Designation," "Alterations and Additions," "Demolition," "New Construction," or "Community Benefit." Transcribed notes from the post-it note activity and from each breakout group are provided on the pages that follow.

Transcribed Notes (captured from roundtable chart pads)

Responses from Introductory Activity: "What's Working and What's Not in Portland's Historic Districts"

Designation:

- Mandatory disclosure of inclusion in a H.D. at time of real estate transaction. Similar to disclosure of energy audit.
- Help lower-income neighborhood organize for H.D.
- Balance social /w Architecture criterion A + B in Districts!
- Not Working: Process of becoming a Historical District. Unclear rules on voting requirements and qualifications.
- Owner consent is bad—desig. process is broken
- People who want designation need to get notarized + not people who don't want! These are the people who want change. This is the key problem with designation process.
- What is not: How significance is defined. Plenty of areas that have social-cultural significance line Albina/Japantown/St. Johns are threatened.
- Oregon's requirement for owner consent for historic designation needs to be reconsidered.
- SHPO HD nominations process needs clarification for its rules for counting objections
- Property owners should not be forced into having their building become a historic resource without their consent.
- Developers influence in Historic Districts, concerned about potential code changes for developer benefit.
- No renters, people of color, or people of limited means are EVER at the table!
- Denies badly needed housing opportunity housing
- Historic boundaries need to be more porous, --flexible.
- "Implied consent" Onus of requiring those opposed to file notarized objections should require 50%+1 of those who approve the historic district.
- Dead people should not be counted in voting for Historic Districts
- Historic Districts need to be created thru super-majority of residents—not owners—Notarized objections are ridiculous!

Alterations and Additions:

- \$ cost of historic review process for alterations + additions
- Reduce fees to \$550 for Type II
- Reduce fees for Type 2
- What's Not Working: Alterations to Contributing & NonContributing Buildings
- Simplify HRR document + application process. Photos, sketches, cutsheets instead of architectural drawings
- Not working—review of non-street facing elevations, such as window replacements or minor alterations
- Not working—solar panel review
- Historic Design Review is too costly, time consuming, and subjective today. City Council is not a good arbitrator of these decisions.
- Current code disincentivizes preservation through costs-both for review and for listing.

- BDS fees are too high for Type II, fees should be lowered to \$550
- Historic districts need to be more flexible [illegible] impermanent changes that have other [illegible] benefits, e.g. solar panels + shingles
- Relax rules for: solar panels, 2nd entry door, non-wood material that looks original
- Property owners should be able to opt out of design review
- Is design review required by state law? What about inducements and assistance
- Ability to address repairs for sellers + buyers, including: 1), Installing handrails & fixing steep stair approaches, 2.) replacing non functional windows that don't open/shut or lock—safety + security concerns
- Voluntary compliance in an HD vs. code + Fee compliance (will state allow?)
- Minor alterations should be allowed more easily; major additions should be held to a higher standard and not detract from the historic resource.
- Knowledgeable volunteers have provided useful architectural advice to neighbors planning to remodel
- Historic review guidelines are inherently subjective, so how well they work depends on how rigorously (or not) they are interpreted and applied by planners and Landmarks Comm.
- District—specific design guidelines have worked well in S. Portland Historic District
- Design review may prevent use of superior or preferable materials (energy efficient windows, solar panels)
- Fix loopholes in B-2 exemption
- Correct B-2 exemption loophole
- Major concern—lack of ability to get answers when buying into a historic district, 1) regarding planned remodels, 2) existing corrections for historic district complaints
- Need more flexibility for window not facing street
- No way to readily let people living in a district know what it means to be in a district. They end up being “surprised” when they try to remodel.
- I would love if historic storefronts, lodges, and community centers within historic districts had the flexibility to be developed more densely by maintaining the street-side façade and otherwise built up where possible.
- National Historic Register/Park Service criteria for allowing design/renovation changes are too strict—one size does not fit all across range of historic significance of different types of properties—for example, criteria “deteriorated beyond repair” is almost impossible to meet and prevents reasonable changes.

Demolition:

- Demolition review is very effective
- Garages should not be subject to demolition review. Encourage ADUs.
- Demolition review is working!
- Demolition review
- Concerns about demolition of buildings
- Demolitions are not being monitored. Demo contractors are cutting corners and not doing their due diligence to play by the rules, especially regarding lead + asbestos abatement.
- Deconstruction mandate is not far-reaching enough and needs to be updated to all structures pre-WWII.
- The City should not use demo. Review on any structure that is not, in and of itself, historic.

- Protection of lower-level of designation
- City Council refused a rezoning of Eastmoreland to stop demolitions. Historic District was the last avenue of protecting the neighborhood. City should use rezoning more judiciously.
- Demolitions should be much more difficult to get.
- Demo review-protection critical to the protection of historic resources
- Demolition protection a must.
- What's not working: wealthier neighborhoods are abusing the National Historic District process to get demolition review + thereby prevent infill + redevelopment
- Protection of properties outside of districts
- What works: protection of significant resources required for review for demolition, design review.
- Demolition of good homes by developers who then overbuild on lots. Slightly increases density but not affordability. Beautiful homes being demolished.
- Demolitions. Home that are unique + one of a kind are being demolished to make McMansions that are taking away airspace. Being built 5 feet from the property lines, being built-higher than the rest of the homes around, out of character form the rest. Making subdivisions where new [illegible] homes were.
- Demolition review is prohibitive. Sometimes a building, although historic, may be in too bad of condition to be restored.
- Incentivize preservation
- Give a bonus for the owner of historic building to ensure preservation
- (1) Preserve neighborhood identity, history
- (2) developers greed influencing city + state policy on historic—what protections against this is City undertaking
- Working: Historic Districts are stopping demolition of homes that are inhabitable and affordable
- There should be no locally imposed regulations in a national historic district w/out City Council decision on it, including no demolition unless city council designates it historic
- In my historic district rent is much more affordable. STOP DEMOLITIONS to save our most affordable housing.
- Stop demolishing useable buildings! Rehab instead!
- Demo's taking away + destroying smaller homes. Where will be the homes to downsize from my larger home when all my children are grown. The smaller homes are being destroyed for McMansions, taxes, + infill. Destroying the livability of beautiful neighborhoods. It's a shame. Preservation of green space.

New Construction:

- Keep taller heights in Central City (unlimited) + along corridors (6 stories on corridors) and w'in ½ mile of transit LRT stations. Rezone Laurelhurst, Eastmoreland, & allow density even if in a district.
- Problem: Design Advice is a great idea, but decisions are actually made at the DARs before significant public involvement.
- Does corner lot design review give priority to omitting driveway cut additions? How can we have a meaningful conversation w/out DR?
- Not working: Insufficient info for developers who want to build in historic districts so they don't get too far with incompatible design.

- Design guidelines particular to each HD, very important
- New Construction: Setbacks within some set mean to surrounding structures
- It is unconscionable that we are losing hundreds of housing units in Central City as HLC rejects bldg.. that meet code hts.
- Not working: Base zone allows height + FAR inconsistent with historic preservation + compatibility (for new construction + additions)
- Heights of new buildings allowed in keeping with surrounding neighbors

Community Benefit:

- Need for housing should overrule HLC's "feelings" of height when code allows much higher. Code should govern, not dist. Guidelines
- Problem: In Historic Districts, often the zoning is more intense than the character of the district. Developers just look at the base zones, big battle to reduce intensity to be compatible
- Historic buildings provide huge economic benefit (like NW 23rd) and provide some of our most affordable housing per sq. foot (King's Hill, West End, + Alphabet Dist)
- Historic Districts can create travel/tourism benefits
- Community benefits and owner benefits
- Historic Districts + supporters are deemed racist and opposed to advancing affordable housing and density
- Concern for the process
- Retention of character/story sense of place
- How can we consolidate space if we are preserving early 20th-century garage locations? Consolidation means more room for trees?
- Not sure if historic districts will ever make much contribution to AFFORDABLE housing. Missing middle, yes!
- Too many historic buildings throughout Portland (not in HD's) are being demolished
- Special assessment program for rehabilitation was great!
- Historic areas are notably walkable—this helps city cut car dependence. Almost all the new houses are auto-centric + degrade ped. Friendliness
- Incentivize SRO ADUs
- Please—stop destroying this beautiful city. The pace of the demolitions is maddening + it no longer feels like home. You will drive away the long-time residents—all for greed.
- Can we shift this conversation to prioritize the conservation of green space, even if it means changing building facades?

Group 1 Notes (Megan Walker, BDS, facilitator; Hillary Adam, BDS, scribe)

- Should be notarized votes for; those who want it should make the case
 - Disagreement w/
- Should be less confusing + easily manipulated
- Should not be able to use “ownership” to influence designation
- Concerns about \$ influencing City Hall
- NR is honorary—local protection should also be honorary
- City should take a role in separating fact from fiction
- Look to other cities
- HR works pretty well, exemptions need some work
 - Solar (too restrictive)
 - Seismic (need exemption)
- Fees should be reduced for HR
- NAs can provide early assistance
 - Helps reduce timeline for review
- NAs can benefit from more training
- Challenges w/ larger developers not working with NAs
- City should do a better job at reducing demolition of most sustainable + affordable bldgs.
- Need more flexibility in reviewing changes + more predictability in what changes may need to be made
- BDS needs to be more helpful in leading people through the process
- Should allow past changes to remain rather than creating more waster
- Want an exemption for do-it-yourselfers
 - Would not be equal application
- Lack of right-zoning is major issue
 - Creates conflict btwn developers + neighborhood
- Decisions are being made at DAR before neighborhood is really involved (lack of notice)
- Guidelines aren’t enough to protect
 - Need to be revisited
- Safety issues should be easier to fix—stairs, windows—to reduce timelines for resolving issues
- Neighborhood contact req needs to be broadened * early in the process

Where are they working + not working

- Taking away housing units in C.C.
- Incremental growth/H.H. freezes evolution
- Designation process → disruptive to neighborhood
- More process/owners should be able to opt out
- Historic neighborhoods are walkable → compact + help further Comp Plan goals.
- Deconstruction does not go far enough.
- Reconsider boundaries → transitions
- Incentivize internal conversions
- Exemptions for alterations, i.e. solar panels, ADU, entries
- Incentives/reduction of fees for restorations
- Base zone should match up w/ historic context. Compatibility.
- Urban design (+ setbacks, street grid) over individual structure.
- Less review for structures/it's the scale of the house + how it's situated on lots.
- Property values remain constant w/review. More predictable infill.
- Demo protection is working
- Designation process is not working.
 - Adopt best practices from other states.
- Need for opportunity flexibility for "missing middle" housing
- City should reach out to communities of color (African American neighborhoods in N. PDX) to help tell their stories.
- Hollywood Transit Station/public investment and the need for high density housing/dev.
 - Laurelhurst is within the transit radius
- The potential of historic districts to meet growth targets while maintaining historic character.

New Construction/Additions

- Why should property owner go through hoops for a dormer to a common house type (Cape Cod)
- More accessible language to clearly articulate what is + isn't possible in Historic Districts.
 - Complexity of code is a barrier.
- Emphasis should be on street-facing façade.
- Allow flexibility for rear, side facades, + garages.
- Historic review should not reduce height, FAR in C.C. don't need to match adjacent heights to historic structures.

Demo

- Demo review is working well but shouldn't apply the same to accessory structures (garages)
- Density vs. preservation
- Reassess Historic Districts every ~10 yrs. to make sure it's taking growth
- Explore zoning categories (i.e. SF home)
 - Need diff. options (boarders)
- Diff. housing costs/more affordable options
- Waivers for SDCs for SRO's, duplexes, etc.

- Stability + continuity in district, positive experience living in district. New blds blend in.
- How could you protect consolidated greenspace?
- Alterations—very awkward + time-consuming. Can prohibit development.
 - (commercial)
- Other options for demolition protection currently Historic Dist. only way to get protection from demo
 - Demo now targets lower income serving properties
- Guidelines specific to each district are essential for clear guidelines. Ambiguity is a problem.
- Important to preserve diverse housing market in a neighborhood.
- Historic district as a tool for preserving diverse housing. But shouldn't be only tool.
- Alterations
 - Should we review alterations on non street facing elevations?
 - Exempt rear of house or ___' from setback
- Some support maintaining historic character on all elevations
- Different levels of review for different scale of resources
- Districts now need community support to educate new home owners
 - So districts rely too much on volunteer engagement
 - (don't overuse volunteer/community)
- If rear facing work allowed (focus on front of house) concern about losing trees/green space
- ADUs:
 - Pros: Accommodates family, affordable housing
 - Cons: lose green space, light
 - Make sure ADUs fit w/ neighborhood
 - Could ADUs be only standards (not guidelines)
 - Waive fees for ADUs
 - Ability to convert older homes into more units—would ease affordable housing
 - How can you support af. housing, but not Airbnb/vacation rentals
- Need for balance between devel and protecting neighborhood character (Division example)
- Buffer zones around historic
- Commercial vs. residential
 - [commercial] changes much more frequently than residential—should same process apply
- Could different rules/timelines be applied for different uses
- Commercial vs. res.
- Front vs. rear review
- ADUs (desire to balance green space/character vs. aff. Housing)
- Historic Districts should not be the only tool available for demo protections (Eastmoreland)—or to preserve neighborhood character (Division)