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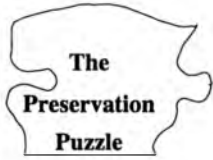
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Questions and Answers Concerning Local Historic Districts in Huntsville, Alabama

Linda Allen

How Does Local District Designation Protect A Historic Neighborhood?

Once a historic district is designated, all exterior changes occurring within its boundaries are reviewed by the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission prior to issuance of a building permit or demolition permit to ensure that changes are not made that would diminish the architectural character of the individual structure or the historic appearance of the district. The purpose of the review is to encourage persons to make exterior changes that are in keeping with the distinctive physical features of the neighborhood and to prevent alterations that would be damaging. While each property owner must relinquish a small amount of control over his property, he is assured that his neighbor will also be held to the same standards. It is this design review feature that is primarily responsible for elevating the value of real estate and creating stability because it provides a sense of security that attracts increased investment.

What Kind Of Work Is Subject To The Review Process?

Any exterior work such as remodeling, new construction, alterations, relocation or demolition of a building or structure. Work that does not require review includes repainting the exterior with the existing colors, replacing window glass, and reroofing with identical materials and color. (A building permit is required for any structural work and for any work costing \$250 or more.) Interior work is not reviewed by the Commission unless it causes a change in exterior appearance.

Who Does This Reviewing?

The Historic Preservation Commission is composed of six members appointed by the mayor for 6-year terms, who serve without compensa-

tion, and three city officials being the Building Inspector, the Planning Director, and one member of the City Council. Appointed members are selected because of their special interest or experience in fields related to historic preservation and history.

What Is The Review Procedure?

Applications for exterior changes are filed at the City of Huntsville Building Inspection office, which is located on the second floor of the Public Service Building at 320 Fountain Circle. Applications are reviewed by the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission which meets at 4:30 pm on the second Monday of each month in the conference room of the Environmental Services Building at 305 Church Street. Commission meetings are open to the public.

Each applicant must be present at the meeting or have a representative present who can explain the proposed work. Commission members will ask questions and consider the request. Comment is taken from the public. After discussion, the members vote on the question of the appropriateness of the proposed work. Once approved by the Commission, the applicant follows normal procedures to get a permit for the described work.

How Does The Commission Evaluate Proposed Work For Appropriateness?

In general, the Commission considers the historical and architectural significance of the structure under review, its relationship to adjacent buildings, and the specific character of the district as a whole; however, each request is then reviewed specifically taking into account the original character of the structure, its current condition, and the proposed changes. Depending on the proposal, the Commission may look at any or all of the following visual and spatial qualities that the district is designed to protect:

- Orientation, setbacks, and spacing of structures
- Building heights
- Building scale
- Facade proportions
- Window proportions, shapes, positions, and patterns
- Size, shape and proportions of entrances and porches

- Roof forms and materials
- Architectural detailing
- Materials, textures, and colors
- Horizontal, vertical or nondirectional emphasis
- Fences, walls, landscaping, walks, and accessory structures.

Obviously changes that may be acceptable in one district would not necessarily be suitable for a different structure in another district having a dissimilar history of development.

What If The Commission Denies A Certificate Of Appropriateness?

The applicant may appeal the Commission's denial to the Circuit Court.

How Is A Local Historic District Established?

Local Act No. 1307 (1971) and statewide enabling Act No. 89-536 (1989) permit the Huntsville City Council to establish historic districts under certain defined conditions. City Ordinances No. 72-47 and 91-597 established the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission. The procedure required to designate a local historic district in Huntsville is as follows:

1. The neighborhood desiring to be designated as a historic district must collect and submit to the city a petition requesting establishment of a historic district. The petition must contain the signatures of at least 60 percent of the property owners as recorded at the tax assessor's office. The percentage will be computed by dividing the number of owners signing by the total number of owners in the proposed district. The wording for the petition will be provided by the planning department.
2. On receipt of the petition, the planning staff will conduct a survey of the proposed historic district in accordance with the rules and regulations of the Alabama Historical Commission. The survey and a statement of significance will be forwarded to the Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission.

3. The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission must hold a public hearing on the proposal. In addition to a general notice of public hearing, all owners of property to be included in the proposed historic district must be notified by mail.
4. The Huntsville Planning Commission will review and consider for adoption the proposed historic district as an element of the comprehensive plan.
5. The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission must make a recommendation to the City Council on the historic district proposal. It will be accompanied by an ordinance for adoption prepared by the planning staff. The Huntsville City Council will consider the recommendation and take action on the ordinance.
6. Following enactment of an ordinance designating a historic district, the inspection staff must give notice in writing of that designation to all agencies of the city and to all owners of property included in the historic district. The planning staff will add the historic district boundaries to the city maps. The Huntsville Historic Preservation Commission begins review of exterior changes to structures in the new historic district.

What Makes A Local Historic District Successful?

For a historic district to be successful, it is imperative that the owners support the idea; if they are not willing to abide by the extra level of regulation, then the advantages of an upgraded and stabilized neighborhood probably will not be realized.