

# National vs Local Historic District Designation

## I. Local Historic Districts

A **local historic district zone** is a special zoning area created by a community to help save historic buildings and to preserve the special sense of time and place that exists in some parts of a community. When a community adopts historic district zoning, it monitors and guides construction activity in its historic areas.

The city or town council must pass an ordinance to establish a historic district commission and to identify areas for designation as historic district zones.

In a local historic district zone all exterior alterations and new construction must be reviewed and approved by the city or local historic district commission. This review ensures that the historic character of the buildings is maintained when necessary changes are made.

The historic district commission only reviews changes proposed by the property owner. When the owner applies for a building permit, the historic district commission will review the proposed work. Each commission has its own written procedures and standards which will help a property owner in preparing for review.

### How are changes to a historic building evaluated?

There are general principles which should guide the rehabilitation of historic buildings. The most common formulation of these general principles or standards is known as the **Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation**. Many local historic district commissions have adopted these standards as their own.

### How does the review process work?

The property owner's application for a building permit begins the review process. If the building official finds that a property is located in a local historic district zone, he or she forwards the permit application to the local historic district commission, which usually holds monthly meetings.

The local commission needs clear information about the proposed changes. Property owners should check with local officials to find out about the application procedures.

Applications for building permits are reviewed at the regular meetings of the local historic district commission. After any needed adjustments, the approved application is stamped, and the building official may issue a building permit.

Decisions of the local historic district commission are binding for the building official, but may be appealed to the local zoning board. The zoning board's decision can be appealed in the state courts.

### Which projects are reviewed by the local historic district commission?

All building projects which affect the exterior appearance of a building in a designated historic district zone are reviewed by the local commission. Paint colors and interior changes are not reviewed by the commission. Commissions draw on a large body of knowledge to advise

homeowners on the most cost-effective methods of construction or replacement. Historic district commissions do not regulate the use of buildings. The allowable uses for a building are determined by a community's zoning ordinance.

## **What is the main advantage of historic district zoning?**

Historic district zoning protects a neighborhood's historic architecture, which largely defines its sense of place. Thoughtless alterations to historic buildings can erode property values and destroy the qualities that make a neighborhood appealing.

## **What is the main disadvantage of historic district zoning?**

Preparing applications to the historic district commission may require extra time and effort before construction begins. The time and effort on the part of the homeowner is usually offset, however, by the expertise and constructive review of the historic district commission and staff, and a more successful construction project.

## **Does local historic district zoning raise property taxes?**

No. Property taxes are based on fair-market value, which is determined by real estate market forces and includes considerations of location, condition, size, and amenities.

Source: [http://www.preservation.ri.gov/local/local\\_zoning.php](http://www.preservation.ri.gov/local/local_zoning.php)

## **II. National Historic Districts**

The National Register of Historic Places is the federal government's official list of properties that are significant in American history and worthy of preservation. Properties listed in the National Register include individual buildings, historic districts, and archaeological sites.

### **How do properties get listed on the National Register?**

In Rhode Island historic properties are nominated to the National Register by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission. The RIHPHC Review Board reviews and evaluates nominations to the National Register. When the Review Board approves the nomination of a property, the State Historic Preservation Officer signs the nomination document, and it is forwarded to the National Park Service in Washington, D.C.

### **How are historic places evaluated for entry in the National Register?**

To be eligible for listing on the National Register a property must have integrity and must meet one of four eligibility criteria established by the Department of the Interior.

#### **Integrity**

A National Register property conveys an accurate and authentic sense of its past.

#### **Eligibility criteria**

To be eligible for listing in the National Register, a property must be significant in the history of

the nation, the state, or its own community. The National Register criteria recognize several different kinds of significance:

1. A property may be significant because it is associated with events or activities which have been important in our past. This may be an association with a specific single event, such as a military battle, or it may be an association with a theme or a trend, such as agriculture, which was important in a community's history.
2. A property may be significant because it has close association with a person who was important in the history of the nation, state, or local community.
3. A property may be significant for its design or physical characteristics. Such a property may embody in a special way the distinctive characteristics of a building type (such as schools, mills, houses), or of a method of construction (such as post-and-beam framing), or of an architectural period or style (such as Greek Revival). Some properties are significant because their architectural quality is high or because they are the work of a master architect or builder.
4. Properties may be significant because they have the potential to provide new information about our past (such as archaeological sites that may contain artifacts that will reveal important aspects of the lives of our ancestors).

## Criteria considerations

Ordinarily, cemeteries, birthplaces or graves of historical figures, properties owned by religious institutions or used for religious purposes, buildings that have been moved, commemorative properties, and properties which are younger than 50 years old are not eligible for the National Register. Exceptions to these considerations are sometimes made.

## What help is available to the owners of National Register properties?

Owners of income-producing properties are eligible to apply for [federal income tax credits](#). [Low-interest loans](#) may be available to owners of National Register properties.

All owners of National Register properties may consult with the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission's staff for free advice about protecting the value of their historic places.

## Are National Register properties protected from deterioration and demolition?

Unfortunately, no. Listing in the National Register is a great honor for a property, but it does not guarantee that the property will never be damaged or demolished. National Register listing provides protection only when public funds or government licenses are involved.

Federal and state projects which might have an impact on these properties are [reviewed](#) by the Rhode Island Historical Preservation & Heritage Commission. Some communities offer additional protection to their historic places through their [local zoning ordinance](#).

## How can I learn more?

The RIHPHC and the National Park Service will provide assistance if you wish to know more. RIHPHC staff will help with the presentation of your property to the Review Board and will let you know the National Register status of any property. The National Park Service provides written

guidance on completing National Register forms, on researching historic properties, and on the process of evaluation. [National Register Bulletins](#), which address specific aspects of the registration process or the evaluation of certain classes of properties, can be accessed [online](#) and are available at the RIHPHC office if you want to consult them. The RIHPHC can provide you with introductory brochures for the National Register in English or Spanish or with fact sheets that outline the effects of National Register listing, the criteria for listing, the rights of owners to comment or object, and the difference between registration and historic district zoning.

If you would like to read the federal regulations that set up the National Register and the processes that accompany registration, see the Code of Federal Regulations (36CFR60), or call us and we'll be glad to send you the relevant sections.

The RI-National Register Search can help you learn more about specific Rhode Island properties listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Search the database to discover information about a single property (like the Westerly Armory on Railroad Street) or multiple properties (like armories statewide).

Source: <http://www.preservation.ri.gov/register/>