



Westport Historic District Commission

Town Hall

Westport, Conn. 06880

Frequently asked questions about the Westport Historic District Commission and the designation of Local Historic Properties / Local Historic Districts

1. *What is the Historic District Commission (HDC)?*

Answer: Established in 1973 under state charter, the HDC consists of eight members (five regular and three alternates) appointed by the First Selectman. These individuals generously volunteer their time and agree to serve a five year term. The Commission's primary objective is to preserve and protect the distinctive architectural character of Westport's historic properties and districts. It does this by reviewing certain types of exterior alterations to structures within the boundaries of Westport's local historic districts.

2. *My friend told me that if you own a local historic property or live in a historic district you can't make any changes to your house- is that true?*

Answer: No, residents of local historic properties or historic districts expand and alter their homes all the time. There are, in fact, *no* inherent restrictions placed on local historic properties or homes located within local historic districts. What exists, instead, is a *design review process*. This process, based on clearly defined guidelines, helps insure that certain changes are made in harmony with the structure and the neighborhood. In turn, this helps to preserve the historic *integrity* of the structure - as well as its contribution to the streetscape.

3. *O.K., so what exactly does the HDC review? The color of my house?*

Answer: The HDC reviews proposed alterations - including demolition - to certain exterior elements of local historic properties. The Commission's purview is strictly limited to those exterior features that are in the "public view". The HDC has no authority whatsoever over interior alterations and does not concern itself with color choices or landscaping. A comprehensive list of what is and isn't subject to review may be found in the *Westport Historic Districts Commission Handbook* (available on the Town Web site and at the Historic District Commission office) - please refer to Part 6.

4. What exactly does “public view” mean?

Answer: That which can be seen from a public right of way - such as a public road or other area normally accessible to the public. Essentially this term refers to that which can be seen from the street and in most instances it simply means the front facade and some portion of the side elevation(s). In general the rear of the structure as well as any other portion not visible from the street is not subject to review.

5. What is a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) - when do I need one, how do I get one and will it cost me anything?

Answer: A *Certificate of Appropriateness* is issued by the HDC - after review at one of their regularly scheduled meetings - and indicates that the exterior changes you propose -*in the public view only* - are appropriate and/or sympathetic to the period and architectural style of the structure in question and, if relevant, in scale with the streetscape.

Routine maintenance, such as painting, caulking, or simple replacement in kind does not require a *Certificate of Appropriateness*. Again, please refer to Part 6 of the Handbook for guidance.

You can apply for a *Certificate of Appropriateness* with the HDC Coordinator in the Historic District Commission office, Room 108. There is no fee to obtain or to apply for a *Certificate of Appropriateness*.

6. Does this mean I'm going to have to hire an architect?

Answer: Unless major alterations are intended, architectural drawings are *not* required to obtain a *Certificate of Appropriateness*. Homeowners may submit simple sketches they have produced themselves or other visual aides (photographs, etc.) to illustrate the proposed minor alteration(s).

7. What is the difference between National, State, and Local Historic Designations?

Answer: the National Register of Historic Places is an ongoing project of the federal government to document the nation's most significant historic properties (buildings, structures, sites and districts). Although it encourages preservation, it does not restrict the rights of private owners in their use, development, or sale. Historic properties that are income producing and listed with the National Register may qualify for a historic rehabilitation tax credit.

The State Register of Historic Places identifies and documents historically significant properties. Although it encourages preservation and provides the recognition the property deserves, it does not restrict the rights of private owners.

Buildings listed on the State Register may be allowed special exemptions from building, life safety, and zoning codes, as well as from the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Local Historic Properties are subject to review by Westport's Historic District Commission which can limit incongruous changes - including demolition - to these historic resources. Local designation offers the best protection for historic buildings and neighborhoods and includes automatic listing in the State Register.

8. *Is there a difference between a Local Historic Property and a Local Historic District ?*

Answer: A local historic property is specially designated as being historically linked to the Town of Westport in architectural character, heritage, cultural identity or significant historical purpose. A local historic district processes a *significant concentration*, linkage, or continuity of buildings, structures, sites or objects that are united historically or aesthetically by plan or physical development.

Note: a district comprises two or more contiguous properties. Rear lot lines and/or empty lots can be included and may connect properties in a district. Properties that are across the street from one another are considered to be contiguous.

9. *Aren't there a lot of restrictions living in a local historic property or historic district?*

Answer: A local historic designation does not carry any inherent design restrictions. However, certain alterations to that portion of the building's exterior *in the public view* are subject to a review by the HDC. The Commission is committed to preserving the character and architecture of Westport's historic resources.

10. *If my neighborhood becomes a local historic district does that mean that I will have to restore my house? Will I now have to maintain it like some kind of museum?*

Answer: No. The HDC does not have the authority to require restoration or to enforce any maintenance standards.

11. *What are the benefits of a local historic designation?*

Answer: Local historic designation carries a certain cache and is one of the best ways to protect the historic character of buildings, streetscapes and neighborhoods from inappropriate alterations, incompatible new construction, and other poorly conceived work - including demolition.

A local historic designation offers the assurance that the distinctive architecture and aesthetic value inherent in the historic resource will remain for the enjoyment of future generations. Local historic districts encourage continuity of design, pride of ownership and help bring an element of predictability to older, established neighborhoods.

At a time when entire neighborhoods are being altered beyond recognition, a local historical district can be an effective means of safeguarding your street from irreversible decisions.

The residents of historic properties and historic districts are usually proud of their unique structures and more often than not consider themselves stewards as much as owners. Local historic designation offers property owners an appropriate and time tested way to shield these important community assets from inappropriate alteration.

12. *How do I know if my house or neighborhood meets the criteria for historic designation?*

Answer: For individual properties, consideration is made on a case by case basis. The following are the basic guidelines and at least one should apply:

- Structure is fifty or more years old.
- Property is listed on the Historic Resources Inventory.
- Property is associated with events or persons important to the development of the Town of Westport.
- Someone famous lived there.
- Designed by a significant architect.
- Structure is indicative of a significant architectural style or period.

13. *What exactly is the Historic Resources Inventory (HRI)?*

Answer: A town-wide listing of buildings and structures identified as being worthy of preservation. A current copy of the inventory list is available on the Town Web site or in the Historic District Commission office, Room 108.

14. *My neighbor's house is only ten years old - can it be included in a Local Historic District too?*

Answer: Yes, as long as the property is contiguous with the others in the proposed district. Although your neighbor's house would be considered "non-contributing" in the historical sense, it would be subject to the same design review process (for any significant alterations in the public view only) as all the others in the district.

15. *How would the HDC review this newer home? Would they try to change it's design?*

Answer: All buildings and structures are recognized as products of their own time and reviewed as such. However, if the homeowner plans on making exterior alterations visible from the public view, the HDC review process would help insure that any changes would *enhance* the building as well as be *compatible* with the historic homes in the district.

16. *There is a house next door to me that is ready to collapse and is really an eyesore - if it ends up in the local historic district does that mean it can never come down?*

Answer: No, it can come down if it is determined that there is no prudent alternative. The HDC will work with the owner of the property to develop a new plan that is compatible with the scale and prevailing architectural style of the neighborhood.

17. *Can additional properties be added to a previously established local historic district?*

Answer: Yes.

18. *Does local historic designation have anything to do with those plaques I see on old houses?*

Answer: The plaques are issued by the Westport Historical Society (WHS), a private, non profit organization which is not affiliated with the Historic District Commission. Your house is automatically eligible for the WHS plaque program if it becomes a local historic property.

19. *Can anyone propose a Local Historic Designation?*

Answer: Yes.

20. *How do I get started on the designation process?*

Answer: If you believe your property possesses historic and/or architectural significance, you would meet with the Historic District Commission to enlist its support. Please ask for the publication "A Citizen's Guide To Local Historic Property or Local Historic District Designation" available at the Historic District Commission office.

21. *What is the approval process like?*

Answer: There are a series of approvals required. The Planning & Zoning Commission (P&Z), HDC, the Connecticut Commission of Culture & Tourism - Historic Preservation & Museum Division (CCT), the property owners of record, and the Representative Town Meeting (RTM) all must approve the establishment of a local historic property or local historic district. For more information on Local

Historic Designation, please refer to Sec. 7-147b , Connecticut Historic Districts And Historic Properties Enabling Legislation.

22. *Will creating a Local Historic Designation require a lot of my time?*

Answer: You may participate as little or as much as you want. The entire process will take approximately six months (a minimum of four to five months but could take up to a year). Your participation will greatly help to expedite the procedure.

23. *Does a Local Historic Designation cost me anything?*

Answer: No, there are no fees for local historic designation.

24. *How will Local Historic Designation affect my property value?*

Answer: Studies done elsewhere consistently conclude that local historic districts have a positive effect on property values within the district. The Realtors in our area report that it does not affect property values in either direction - consult with your own Realtor.

25. *How does the voting work for property owner(s) of a proposed local historic property or within a proposed local historic district?*

Answer: A legal notice of public hearing for a property within a proposed local historic district will be published and sent to all owners of record. The purpose of the hearing is to review the request for local property designation and to accept the study report reviewed by the State and P&Z. Unless the owner or more than 50% of the owners of the property submit notarized written objections within 30 days of the public hearing, the RTM can vote to approve the ordinance to create the local historic property.

Answer: For a local historic district- legal notice of balloting will be published and an official ballot is sent to all owners of record in the proposed district. Only one vote per owner regardless of the number of properties they own in the proposed local historic district. Multiple owners are allowed a vote equal to the fraction of their interest in the property. If two-thirds of the properly executed ballots returned are in the affirmative, the RTM can vote to enact the new Local Historic District ordinance.

26. *Is the ordinance establishing local historic designation permanent?*

Answer: Yes, a copy of the ordinance is recorded on the land records.