



LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICTS

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What are the main purposes of a historic district?

A historic district accomplishes two principal objectives:

1. A higher bar to the demolition of structures that contribute to the character of the district.
2. Establishment of design standards to help property owners, architects, and contractors choose designs for additions to contributing houses and for new construction that are compatible with the character of the historic district.

What do the words “contributing” and “non-contributing” mean?

A contributing structure is one which retains a high degree of architectural integrity, and was built during the period of significance for the district. A non-contributing structure is one that was not built during the period of significance for the district (generally less than 50 years ago), or, if built during the period of significance, has architectural modifications that compromise the structure’s ability to convey its historic appearance.

Do the design standards apply to non-contributing structures within the district?

No. The only time that the design standards could be applied to non-contributing structures within the district is when a property owner seeks to restore the historic appearance of the structure so that it could contribute to the character of the district.

What benefits does the City offer to property owners within historic districts?

The City offers a property tax abatement for the rehabilitation of contributing properties and for rehabilitation work on non-contributing properties, if the proposed work will make that property contributing through the reversal of the modifications that made the property non-contributing in the initial survey. The program will abate the property taxes on the increased value of the property for a period of 7 years if the property is owner-occupied, and for 10 years if the property is income-producing. City Historic Preservation Office staff can provide further information about the property tax abatement program.

What responsibilities do property owners in a historic district take on?

All property owners within the City of Austin are required to maintain their property to minimum standards, which include the structural soundness of the building, deteriorated roofing or siding materials, broken windows, ensuring the safe anchorage of architectural features, maintaining stairways, porches and balconies, maintaining the chimney, keeping the yard free of debris, vermin, and trash, and adequate drainage to prevent the pooling of water. The City has enacted a provision for owners of contributing properties within locally-designated historic districts, which prioritizes repair over demolition, and sets up a process for city staff to work with property owners to remedy deteriorated or dangerous buildings.

Is review by the Historic Landmark Commission required for every change I want to make to my house?

No. In our experience, many of the changes that property owners wish to make to their contributing structures can be approved by the City Historic Preservation Office. Routine maintenance, replacement of materials with like or in-kind replacement materials, small additions, and site features, (such as pools, walls, and fences) can generally be approved without a public hearing by the Historic Landmark Commission. The Historic Landmark Commission will review proposals for larger-scale projects, such as the construction of a large addition or a secondary dwelling unit, and will use the design standards crafted specifically for the historic district. Further, historic district design standards do not apply to the interior of your house.

Will the City dictate my choice of paint colors?

No. Your choice of paint colors for your house is your decision.

Will the City tell me what flowers or trees I can plant in my yard, whether I can have a basketball hoop on my garage, or have a hammock in my yard?

No. The provisions of a historic district differ substantially from those for a home-owners' association. Historic districts preserve the architectural character of the contributing houses within the district. They are not intended to curtail your enjoyment of your property by you and your family.

Can I undertake green and energy-efficiency measures on my house?

Of course! Historic preservation and energy efficiency go hand in hand. There are many ways to make an older house more energy efficient without sacrificing its historic appearance, and many ways that homeowners can live a more green existence through rainwater collection, solar panels, and other measures. Historic district design standards speak to and encourage energy efficiency and living green. Demolishing a house can send a great deal of material to the landfill, and the manufacture of new materials involves the expenditure of a lot of energy.