
HISTORIC
PRESERVATION TASK
FORCE
on Philadelphia's Historic
Districts



Washin'gton Detail
FDR Park



200 Block of Delancey

Analysis and Recommendations

***** DRAFT FOR PUBLIC DISCUSSION *****

February 17, 2005

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Executive Summary

Founded in 1682 by William Penn, Philadelphia contains unparalleled historical resources that span over three centuries of the cultural, social, political, economic and architectural history of the city, the commonwealth and the nation. As the birthplace of American Independence, Philadelphia's importance to the history of the United States was and is unequalled by any other American city.

The historic buildings and districts of Philadelphia are among the city's defining features. They make visible the city's rich development history, and provide one of the most complete textbooks in the country on the evolution of American architecture. The historic sites celebrate the important people and events associated with the city and the nation. As a result, Philadelphia is a city with genuine character, in growing contrast to the homogenization of most of America's urban areas. This character is important to residents' sense of place, and to the economic attractiveness of the city. It differentiates Philadelphia from all other cities, underpins its hospitality industry, and offers a quality of life that attracts and retains many of those who live and work in the region.

The formal process of maintaining a Philadelphia Register of Historic Places (Register) plays an important role in preserving the city's historic resources. In 1955, the council and mayor created the Philadelphia Historical Commission, and a major set of amendments in 1985 created the ground rules now in place for the Commission. Currently the Commission has the power to designate historic buildings, structures, sites objects and districts for inclusion on the register. Once included, the commission must approve any changes to their appearance. To date, over 5,000 individually listed properties, in all neighborhoods of the city, and nine historic districts have been designated and are included on the Philadelphia Register.

The nine current historic districts in the city (and the year of their designation) are:

- ❖ Diamond Street Historic District (1986)
- ❖ League Island Park Historic District (1986)
- ❖ Park Avenue (Mall) Historic District (1990)
- ❖ Rittenhouse-Fitler Residential Historic District (1995)
- ❖ Historic Street Paving Historic District (1998)
- ❖ Girard Estate Historic District (1999)
- ❖ Society Hill Historic District (2000)
- ❖ Spring Garden Historic District (2000)
- ❖ Old City Historic District (2004)

A 14 member Philadelphia Historical Commission that consists of 8 appointed members and 6 ex officio members administers the Philadelphia Register. The Commission staff includes four professionals and one administrative assistant, working under the direction of an executive director.

Over the past several years, a number of issues have arisen concerning the creation of historical districts. Concerns have also been voiced about the impacts of designation of historic districts. In response, Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell created a Task Force to consider the issues and make recommendations to her and the Philadelphia City Council. The Task Force was asked to address the following issues:

- How to ensure that the process for nominating and considering the designation of historic districts is as inclusive as possible, and that full consideration is given to the impacts of designation on the broad range of owners and residents of the affected community.
- Whether significant financial burdens are imposed on property owners in designated areas by historic district standards, and if so, how these burdens might be mitigated, particularly for low-income owners and residents.
- How to ensure that historic district requirements are not an impediment to the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative (“NTI”) efforts, and to ensure that there is coordination between the activities of the Historical Commission staff and the NTI staff.

The Task Force became informed about the issues by seeking public input, soliciting the advice of experts, and by sharing its internal experiences. As a result of this process, this report contains sixteen recommendations to improve the historical district designation process and the general workings and administration of the Historical Commission. Each of these recommendations is designed to stand alone; that is, the implementation of any or all of these recommendations will, we believe, enhance the ability of the Historical Commission and its staff to respond to the needs of preserving Philadelphia’s architectural treasures as well as making the district designation process as open and transparent as possible.

We found that there was a fundamental lack of information about historic preservation, and in particular about the designation process, and procedures for obtaining permission for improvements to properties in historic districts. There is a need for a continuous process of public education about historic preservation, as well as some changes to the notification process to property owners about proposed historic districts. We also found that there is a need for the Historical Commission to become more “customer service oriented” and to change its image to reflect the fact that it serves as a technical resource for property owners, and not simply a regulatory agency.

Historic preservation has many diverse purposes and rewards, which include the fostering of civic beauty and community pride and the appreciation of local and national history. The process of creating historic districts should be a force for building communities, rather than dividing them. The benefits of such districts accrue to all owners, but those affected must also have the ability to participate in decisions of districts, and there must be fair treatment of all homeowners. Low and moderate income homeowners, in particular, must have resources, through savings, grants, loans, tax credits or other tax incentives, to help them realize the benefits of historic preservation.

This report of the Task Force represents its considered opinions and advice. It is addressed to the members of City Council, the Mayor, and the Historical Commission, in the interest of improving the process of managing the city's historic resources.

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Formal procedures need to be adopted to ensure that there are greater opportunities for input by property owners and residents at early stages of the historic district designation process. These procedures are spelled out in greater detail below.
2. The Historical Commission should undertake an overview of the city's historic resources with the intention of identifying areas that might in the future be considered possible historic districts. Such a process would develop criteria for districts, and focus attention on priority areas, rather than relying solely on community initiatives.
3. The Historical Commission should seek funding to allow it to underwrite some of the expense of preparation of historic district nominations. This would allow for more substantive involvement by the Commission staff, earlier in the process, and could improve the quality of nomination the Commission receives. It would also allow consideration of historic districts in areas where there are not sufficient community resources to support the costs of preparing a nomination.
4. It is important to clarify the formal appeal process from historic district designation. The form of this process requires further study and consultation with the City's Law Department. It may require amendments to the current preservation ordinance.
5. The Historical Commission should prepare guides for all residential historical districts currently lacking these and distribute all guides on its website.
6. Real estate agents should be required to disclose to prospective buyers whether a property is located in a local historic district. They should be required to provide a copy of the guide for property owners to purchasers prior to agreement of sale.
7. The L & I Certificate, which certifies that a property is in compliance with current zoning regulations and is required for closing, should include a disclosure, in a prominent location, indicating whether the property is in a historic district.
8. The City provides ten-year tax abatements for external rehabilitation of property including those properties in historic districts. The criteria governing this policy, and procedures for application should be spelled out in language that is easily understood. The Historical Commission should publicize this benefit on its web site and to applicants. Further study of targeted tax abatements and tax increment financing in historic districts is recommended. Implementation of the results said study may require enabling legislation on by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.
9. The City should support legislation for state tax credits for rehabilitation by homeowners in historic districts.

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10. The City should investigate the application of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts in historic districts, with part of the proceeds used to fund a district improvement fund of loans and grants for rehabilitation.
 11. The City should publicize existing home improvement loan programs to residents of historic districts
 12. The City should activate the NTI home improvement loan program and make special efforts to encourage low income homeowners in historic districts to take advantage of it.
 13. A better website needs to be created for the Historical Commission that includes more information on the process of application, resources available, committee and Commission agendas and links to other organizations that can help property owners. The website must be updated regularly. The full list of properties that are on the register needs to be included on the web site. Each historic district needs to be fully described, and guides to property owners in each district need to be on the web site. The site should also include examples of successful rehabilitation efforts. The website also needs to be updated on a regular basis.
 14. The Commission needs to engage in cooperative relationships with other organizations to bring more resources into play. These include other preservation organizations, community associations, university programs in historic preservation, and professional organizations. Commission staff should meet with community associations in historic districts at least annually.
 15. The Commission needs to consider increasing its number of meetings or otherwise adjusting its pattern to allow greater time for discussion of preservation policies and major decisions on the designation of properties and districts, while allowing discussion of exterior alterations to be handled efficiently.
 16. In 2005, the Historical Commission will appoint a new executive director. Qualifications for the positions should include skills and experience with outreach, public education and organizational management, as well as skill in historic preservation policies and practices.

Historical Preservation Task Force on the Historic District Designation Process

Overview

Over the past several years, a number of issues have arisen concerning the creation of historical districts. Conflicts over whether to nominate portions of the Spruce Hill neighborhood as a historical district have raised questions about how the process for preparing and considering potential historic districts can be made fair and inclusive. In that context, and elsewhere in the city, there have been a number of fears and questions about whether the burdens imposed by historic districts weigh too heavily on low-income residents and home owners. The City's accelerated efforts to remove blighted structures in areas of high abandonment have also raised issues of the coordination of NTI with the federal requirements designed to ensure that historic resources are considered in the process of urban redevelopment.

To advise the City Council on these issues, 3rd District Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell appointed a Task Force to consider these issues. The members of the Task Force are listed in Appendix A to this report.

All of the members of the Task Force have had experience with the historic preservation process – as current and past members of the Commission, as public officials helping citizens through the process, as professionals working on projects that require approvals by the Historical Commission, or as preservation professionals. The Task Force's efforts were ably supported by Penn Praxis, under the direction of Harris Steinberg, and by Alicia Orduna-Sneed, special assistant to Councilwoman Blackwell. Randall Mason of the University of Pennsylvania Historic Preservation Program did a special study for the Task Force of historic preservation practices in other comparable cities.

Charge of the Task Force

The Historic Preservation Task Force was asked to address the following three specific issues. These were:

- How to ensure that the process for nominating and considering the designation of historic districts is as inclusive as possible, and that full consideration is given to the impacts of designation on the broad range of owners and residents of the affected community.
- Whether significant financial burdens are imposed on property owners in designated areas by historic district standards, and if so, how these burdens might be mitigated, particularly for low-income owners and residents.
- How to ensure that historic district requirements are not an impediment to NTI efforts and to ensure that there is coordination between the activities of the Historical Commission staff and the NTI staff.

The Task Force remained focused on these issues, despite the pleas of some who attended public meetings that it address broader issues of the costs and benefits of historic preservation, its economic impacts, and the organization of preservation activities. We recognize that these and other issues are worth of consideration. This year represents the 20th Anniversary of the current preservation ordinance, and may be an opportune time for the Mayor to initiate such a review, incorporating the results of this more limited investigation.

Process

The Task Force became informed about the issues through seeking public input, by soliciting the advice of experts, and by sharing the experiences of its members.

Four public meetings were held in the evenings at the Community College of Philadelphia to solicit public input. The meetings were widely publicized, and over 200 people attended the meetings. Many important points of view were expressed on the issues at hand, and more generally on the merits and problems of preservation in Philadelphia. Many of those attending have been active in the debate over nomination of a proposed historic district in Spruce Hill, West Philadelphia.

Individuals who have dealt with the issues at hand were invited to share their experiences and provide advice at the meetings. The Task Force heard from individuals who were involved in the designation of the Girard Estates Historic District and the Old City Historic District, as well as from those who advocate and oppose creation of a Spruce Hill historic district. Members of the Historical Commission staff illuminated the Task Force on current procedures for dealing with homeowners wishing to make improvements but having limited resources for carrying them out. It heard from builders faced with similar problems. A member of the Financial Hardship Committee of the Historical Commission outlined the current procedures for hardship variances, and provided examples of cases where financial hardship cases have been considered. The director of the City's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative spoke about current procedures for coordinating historic district regulations with redevelopment efforts. The director of one of the city's leading community development corporations (CDCs) shared his thoughts on the sometimes-competing objectives of meeting preservation standards and realizing projects. Members of the public shared other personal experiences that were relevant to the issues under consideration.

The Task Force also received written comments on the issues and proposals from a number of individuals and community groups, which were considered carefully in arriving at recommendations.

The issues here are being addressed in the context of bills that have been introduced in City Council over the past two years to alter the responsibilities for designation of historic districts. Members of the Task Force are aware of the public comments on these bills, and have taken them into account.

Randall Mason of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a brief study of practices in other comparable cities for the Task Force. These results are included in Appendix B.

In addition to attending the public meetings, the Task Force met in executive session on seven occasions to discuss its findings and decide upon recommendations.

[A draft of the Task Force report was circulated to all who attended sessions, and neighborhood and preservation organizations. A fourth public meeting was held to receive feedback on the report and recommendations before their submission.] To be inserted in final report.

This report of the Task Force represents its considered opinions and advice. It is addressed to the members of City Council, the Mayor, and the Historical Commission, in the interest of improving the process of managing the city's historic resources.

Findings of the Task Force

On the Designation Process:

Findings:

Philadelphia now has two decades of experience in considering the designation of historic districts. The record suggests that methods have been found to accommodate local disagreements in the designation of the nine current historic districts. Frequently the boundaries of the approved districts are smaller than those nominated, and the process of adjusting boundaries as the nomination is considered is one way that some objections to designation have been accommodated. Such a resolution has not yet been reached in the Spruce Hill area, but the nomination has yet to be formally dealt with by the Historical Commission.

Although we did not uncover major flaws in the current designation process, we did find a number of areas that could be improved through some changes to the procedures and regulations of the Commission. In particular, we believe there needs to be more emphasis on early notification of home owners of nominations of districts, and more emphasis on accountability for public outreach by both the commission and those making nominations. Our recommendations on these subjects are summarized below.

Discussion:

The current process of nominating historic districts relies upon community initiatives. Since the process requires those advocating creation of a historic district to raise the funds necessary to prepare the technical work documenting the historic resources, it generally requires a broad-based effort. In areas such as the Old City, the community association took the lead in preparing the nomination. This process may disadvantage communities without the resources to prepare a district nomination and may unintentionally exclude those in communities lacking the resources to help mount such efforts. Once a district is created, community support also is essential to the enforcement of historic district regulations.

Most Task Force members shared a general belief that the historical and architectural merits of a proposed district should be the decisive factors in the creation of the historic district. If historic districts are created on merit, a critical element of the review process is that all property owners and residents have ample notification and opportunity to voice their views on the merits and impacts of proposed designations, in a timely way, so that the commission can make its judgments accordingly.

The Historical Commission has little involvement in the process until it receives a nomination. Once it is received, the Commission's Designation Committee considers the application, and may hear testimony for and against designation in considering its recommendation to the Commission. However, under current procedures no public hearings or public notification is required until the Commission takes up a nomination upon the recommendation of its designation committee. Concerns have been expressed that the hearings come too late for residents and property owners to feel that their voices will be heard in a meaningful way.

We concluded that the lack of clarity about inclusion and community support can lead to a lack of confidence in the fairness of decisions on designation. This appears to be the case in Spruce Hill, where there are perceptions that not all the community was aware of the preparation of the nomination, and that many were not invited to participate in the process.

The Task Force discussed possible shifts in responsibility for designation of historic districts, and noted the fact that in most other cities this is the responsibility of elected officials. However, it concluded that the current method whereby the designation is made by the Historical Commission, on advice of a Designation Committee, has served the City well over the past two decades, and should continue. It places the emphasis on the substantive merit of historic resources, while allowing the Commission to take account of impacts in making final decisions about boundaries and resources. Nonetheless, the Task Force concluded that the current procedures need to be improved to assure that the process is perceived as fair and inclusive.

A number of individuals who spoke at public meetings and several of the briefs we received advocated a policy of allowing individual property owners to opt-out of proposed historic districts. After some discussion of this issue, we concluded that it would be incompatible with the purposes of historic preservation. Individual preferences cannot be permitted to prevail over the public benefits of preserving historic resources. Owners of individual properties being considered for listing on the Philadelphia Register do not have the ability to opt out of designation, and a similar policy should apply to the inclusion of individual properties in the designation of historic districts. The Designation Committee of the Commission and the full Commission should continue its policy of carefully reviewing the proposed boundaries of historic districts to ensure that optimum public benefit is achieved without creating undue burdens for property owners whose properties may not be contributing to the fabric of a historic district.

While the city currently has a mixture of large, diverse historic districts, and smaller more homogeneous districts, we are of the opinion that smaller areas of distinct character are more appropriate in the future. Conservation districts, recently approved by City Council can complement historic districts, and may be the more appropriate instrument to manage the character of larger communities. In advocating smaller historic districts, we take our cues from recent designation processes, including that for Old City, where the Commission chose to draw boundaries smaller than the community nomination, in order to focus on the core of historic resources.

Conservation districts may be more appropriate where historic resources are scattered but where a district has cohesive character. Several small historic districts might be nested within a historic district. By using the two instruments in a coordinated way, communities can have an assurance about their future without invoking historic district standards for the entire area.

It is clear to the Task Force that part of the difficulty of providing adequate notice and soliciting broad input early in the process of considering nominations is the result of an under-staffed Commission. Over the past decade, the responsibilities of the staff have multiplied several-fold, with the addition of several major historic districts and thousands of individual properties. The

staff has not been given adequate resources to deal with their ongoing responsibilities, much less become involved with potential historic districts. We return to these issues later in our report.

Finally, the lack of clarity about the appeals process for designation of historic districts is troubling to the Task Force. Having the right to appeal decisions is a well accepted principle of law, and increases confidence in procedures. Individual property owners facing historic designation may appeal the designation to the Board of Licenses and Inspections Review, and ultimately to the courts. There is no precedent for an appeal of an entire district nomination, or for individual properties included, and the Board may not be the appropriate body to consider such an appeal. The Task Force considered various alternatives, including the appeal of district designations to City Council, which seemed to be an inversion of the current delegation of responsibility. This is a matter that requires further study and consultation with the City's Law Department.

Recommendations on designation process:

1. Formal procedures need to be adopted to ensure that there are greater opportunities for input by property owners and residents at early stages of the designation process. Specifically:
 - The Commission should require that any group nominating an area as an historic district also submit a report describing the process it has used to solicit community input and support for the designation. It must show at least one open community meeting at which the Historical Commission staff has participated and explained the implications of historic districts, and should include other community meetings and forms of communication appropriate to the neighborhood. Public meetings should be held in locations convenient to and welcoming of all groups in the area. One method to document community support is through a petition. While not making petitions mandatory, the Commission should recognize petitions signed by 30% of property owners in an area as evidence justifying consideration of a nomination.
 - Upon receipt of a nomination, the Commission should notify by mail all property owners and community associations in the area that it has received this nomination and will be reviewing it. Property owners and other interested parties should be given 45-60 days to comment on the proposal to the Historical Commission staff. The notice should also include the expected schedule for the overall process.
 - Upon conclusion of the comment period, Commission staff should prepare its report on comments received from property owners and the community. This, along with the staff evaluation and the consultants report, should be forwarded to the Designation Committee.
 - The Commission should notify all property owners 30 days in advance of the start of public meetings of the Designation Committee. The Designation Committee should hold one or all of its meetings in a location in or near the district.
 - When the Designation Committee makes its recommendation to the Commission for the creation of an historic district, notice of the Commission's meetings should be sent to all property owners and posted in the proposed district as currently required by the ordinance.
 - The second of the Commission's three required meetings should be held in a neighborhood location.

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- Public meetings should be held in locations convenient to and welcoming of all groups in the area
2. The Historical Commission should undertake an overview of the city's historic resources with the intention of identifying areas that might in the future be considered possible historic districts. Such a process would develop criteria for districts, and focus attention on priority areas, rather than relying solely on community initiatives.
 3. The Historical Commission should seek funding to allow it to underwrite some of the expenses of preparation of historic district nominations. This would allow for more substantive involvement by the Commission staff, earlier in the process, and could improve the quality of nominations the Commission receives. It would also allow consideration of historic districts in areas where there are not sufficient community resources to support the costs of preparing a nomination.
 4. It is important to clarify the formal appeals process from historic district designation. The form of this process requires further study and consultation with the City's Law Department. It may require amendments to the current preservation ordinance.

On the Burdens on Low Income Owners and Residents:

Findings:

While there is a general belief that historic district standards add costs to renovation and repairs, the magnitude of such burdens is not able to be documented. We did not find that there have been significant or widespread examples of economic hardships as a result of designation of historic districts. Many of the areas designated have been middle to upper income areas. Only one of the current historic districts is a low income area, and if preservation is extended to other low income areas, the costs of improvements may become more of an issue.

We did find that the current procedures for hardship relief are not well understood by the public, and the very term "hardship", and the rules for application may deter many from applying for relief. Moreover, regulatory relief may not be the only or the preferable way to address this issue. There is a need for additional economic incentives, and new sources of funds for exterior rehabilitation in historic districts.

Discussion:

Testimonials to the Task Force, and experienced building professionals express the view that in typical situations, there are some added costs in meeting the standards of historic districts, as compared to the lowest cost building practices. These costs, however, vary considerably depending upon the circumstances. In some cases, such as the repair and re-use of existing windows and doors rather than replacement, there may actually be cost savings over common practices in areas outside of historic districts.

The staff of the Historical Commission has considerable expertise to help property owners on the choice of external rehabilitation techniques. It spends a large fraction of its time in providing such assistance. However the availability of this expertise is not well known, and the working hours and City Hall location of the staff may be impediments for working homeowners to take advantage of this resource.

The Historical Commission's hardship provisions offer one form of relief for property owners who cannot afford to meet the standards for rehabilitation. But this avenue is not widely known or understood. Most hardship applications have been for cases where work has been done without permits, which in itself is revealing. The materials that are required to demonstrate hardship may be considered intrusive by property owners, and because of the small number of cases to date, owners submitting to the hardship process have no idea of what outcome to expect.

This is symptomatic of the general lack of information about what is required of owners making improvements in historic districts. Guides for property owners are available for only four of the nine historic districts. Two of the historic districts lack even basic maps indicating their boundaries on the current Historical Commission web site. Even in areas where guides have been published (they are also not on the web), only those who owned properties at the time that the district was created would likely have such guides in hand (assuming they kept them). Since owners change over time, there is a constant need to notify new owners of requirements of districts, and there are no current procedures to do so.

While rehabilitation costs may be greater in historic districts, current policies on tax abatements tend to favor new construction over existing structures. New construction in historic districts also generally escapes the fine grained regulations and review of the Historical Commission. There is a need to adjust the incentives to put improvements to certified historic structures or historic structures in district on an equal footing with new construction.

The Task Force also found that many other cities have developed substantial incentives for improving structures in historic districts. These include tax credits, targeted preferential loan programs, and tax abatements. Currently proposed legislation at the State level would provide tax credits for homeowners in historic districts. But city action is also necessary. Real estate tax abatements and tax increment financing are two potential sources of funding for improvements to properties in historical districts.

Philadelphia currently offers a ten-year real estate tax abatement to owners making improvements to eligible residential property in an amount equal to that portion of the additional assessment attributable to the actual cost of the improvements made.¹ Although the abatement was established to abate only the incremental increase in taxes assessed on the actual cost of improvements, the practical application has been a complete freeze on the real estate taxes for that property. Thus, a homeowner could make a minor repair on his or her property and lock in their current real estate tax payment for ten years, regardless of any changes in tax rate or property value.

¹ *Philadelphia Code, §19-1303(2).*

If the current policy and application of the ten-year real estate tax abatement changes (which we believe is likely), the City could create a special real estate tax abatement for low-income homeowners in historic districts which would allow these homeowners certain additional benefits. We strongly urge the City to ensure that such an abatement reaches as many homeowners as is practical.

Tax increment financing is also a potential avenue to finance improvements to properties within historic districts. These are widely used in commercial districts, and could be extended to residential areas. One use of TIF revenues might be the creation of a low-interest loan or grant program for rehabilitation of exteriors of structures in historic districts to meet Historical District standards. This is an alternative to tax abatements, and needs to be investigated further. The use of tax increment financing has proven successful in several cities, particularly Chicago.

Recommendations:

The Historical Commission staff should make greater efforts to extend its expertise to residents of historic districts, at times and places that are convenient for property owners. This might involve holding clinics in the evenings, jointly sponsored by community associations that outline the regulations and provide advice on common rehabilitation techniques.

5. The Historical Commission should prepare guides for all residential historical districts currently lacking these and distribute all guides on its website.
6. Real estate agents should be required to disclose to prospective buyers whether a property is located in a local historic district. They should be required to provide a copy of the guide for property owners to purchasers prior to agreement of sale.
7. The L & I Certificate, which certifies that a property is in compliance with current zoning regulations and is required for closing, should have a box added that indicates whether the property is in a historic district.
8. The City provides ten-year tax abatements for rehabilitation of property including properties in historic districts. The criteria governing this policy, and procedures for application should be spelled out in language that is easily understood. The Historical Commission should publicize this benefit on its web site and to applicants. Further study of targeted tax abatements and tax increment financing in historic districts is recommended. Implementation of the results said study may require enabling legislation by the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.
9. The City should support legislation for State tax credits for rehabilitation by homeowners in historic districts.
10. The City should investigate the application of Tax Increment Financing (TIF) districts in historic districts, with part of the proceeds used to fund a district improvement fund of loans and grants for rehabilitation.

On the Coordination of Historic District and Neighborhood Transformation Initiative Efforts:

Findings:

The principal point of intersection between the two programs is the federally mandated Section 106 reviews, required to certify that historic resources are not being jeopardized by city redevelopment efforts that use federal funds or may use federal funds in the future. We found that the City's NTI staff and the Historic Commission staff appear to be working smoothly, without inordinate delays created by the need for conducting Section 106 reviews. The planned addition of staff to the Historical Commission dedicated to this review process may continue to help reduce the bottlenecks that have previously occurred.

As NTI was getting off the ground two years ago, there were delays in conducting the necessary federally mandated Section 106 reviews in a timely manner. However, over the intervening months staff of the Historical Commission and the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative have developed strong relations and delays have been virtually eliminated. Testimony to the Task Force suggested that there is now a good working relationship between the Historical Commission staff and the NTI staff.

Discussion:

NTI offers several potential advantages to historic districts. The existing NTI funded home improvement loan programs offer assistance to a wider range of eligible applicants in all sections of the city than have previously been available. The proposed NTI home improvement program for low income homeowners in historic districts could become an effective tool for aiding low income homeowners in rehabilitation of historic properties. Inclusion of historic properties in developer packages that involve new construction may provide new opportunities to save historic resources.

A larger review of the NTI – historic preservation relationship is being undertaken jointly by the City and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. This will look at issues in a more detailed manner than the Task Force was able to, and any action should await the results of this process.

Recommendations

11. The City should publicize existing home improvement loan programs to residents of historic districts of it.
12. The City should activate the NTI home improvement loan program and make special efforts to encourage low income homeowners in historic districts to take advantage of it.

Improving the Historic Preservation Process

Findings:

We found that there was a general lack of information about historic preservation, and in particular about the designation process, and procedures for obtaining permission for improvements to properties in historic districts. There is a need for a continuing process of public education about historic preservation, procedures and techniques.

We also found that there is a need for the Historical Commission to become more "customer service" oriented and to change its image to reflect the fact that it serves as a technical resource for property owners, and not simply a regulatory agency.

Discussion:

The most important issue that emerged from the public meetings of the Task Force was the need for better public information and education about the creation of historic districts and the implications for property owners in these districts. A number of those attending the meetings were from areas contemplating nominations for historic districts; they attended to get information they felt they were unable to get from the Commission. Several things seem badly needed:

- Better materials on Commission procedures, including designation of structures, and requirements that property owners must meet.
- Information for homeowners about contractors, materials and rehabilitation techniques.
- Information on forms of financial assistance or benefits potentially available to property owners who rehabilitate their structures.

The Historic Preservation Task Force recognizes the constraints of expanding Historical Commission outreach efforts because of the City's financial situation. Not all of these outreach efforts, however, need to be the responsibility of the Historical Commission; it can create partnerships with preservation groups such as the Preservation Alliance, community associations and CDCs to ensure that informational needs are met. As examples, such organizations could take the lead in organizing workshops on home maintenance, maintaining lists of qualified contractors and consultants, compiling examples and samples of recommended materials, and organizing workshops on preparing nominations for historic properties and districts.

As we have noted, the Task Force was impressed by the services currently being provided by the Commission staff. The external impression of the Historical Commission, however, is of a regulatory body that makes rehabilitation more difficult, not more manageable. The Commission needs to reshape its external image, and to accelerate the process of becoming more "service oriented." The role of the director should include outreach to the communities with significant historic resources, including historic districts. The public face of the Commission – now on an upper floor of City Hall – needs to be more visible, and have hours more attuned to the needs of property owners. The Commission staff needs to partner with many more organizations that can help provide the assistance needed as preservation grows in importance in the city.

Finally, the Task Force takes note of the lengthening meeting agendas and growing burden on Commission members. With nine active historic districts and over 5000 historic properties – numbers that are growing each year – not only the staff but the Commission itself is stretched

thin. Monthly meetings of the Commission, which often run to four or five hours allow too little time for adequate treatment of major issues, while requiring lengthy waits for those who wish to speak on the issue related to historic districts. The Commission needs to adjust its pattern to reflect the current scale of operation, and the City needs to fund adequate staff for the Commission to allow public outreach and assistance as well as regulatory activities. A special opportunity exists in 2005 appoint a new executive director. Qualifications for the positions should include skills and experience with outreach, public education and organizational management, as well as skill in historic preservation policies and practices.

Recommendations:

13. A better website needs to be created for the Historical Commission that includes more information on the process of application, resources available, committee and Commission agendas and links to other organizations that can help property owners. The website must be updated regularly. The full list of properties that are on the Register needs to be included on the web site. Each historic district needs to be fully described, and guides to property owners in each district need to be on the web site. The site should also include examples of successful rehabilitation efforts. This website must be updated on a regular basis.
14. The Commission needs to engage in cooperative relationships with other organizations to bring more resources into play. These include other preservation organizations, community associations, university programs in historic preservation, and professional organizations. Historical Commission staff members should meet at least annually with members of interested community groups to update them on the status of historic preservation in the City.
15. The Commission needs to consider increasing its number of meetings or otherwise adjusting its pattern to allow greater time for discussion of preservation policies and major decisions on the designation of properties and districts, while allowing discussion of alternations of properties to be handled efficiently.
16. In 2005, the Historical Commission will appoint a new executive director. Qualifications for the positions should include skills and experience with outreach, public education and organizational management, as well as skill in historic preservation policies and practices.

Conclusion

The history of Philadelphia over the last three hundred and twenty-two years is an important window into the lives, values and priorities of the people who lived there. Visitors marvel at the wealth of historic architecture that can be found in varying states of preservation in neighborhoods throughout the city. Each of the districts designated by the Philadelphia Historical Commission to date has a special place in the city's rich and diverse history from the pre-Colonial era, to the Greek Revival period of the 1820's and 1830's, the Victorian architecture of the late 1800's to the post modern architectural era.

Philadelphia in the 21st century must be a city that remembers the past, embraces the present and stays focused on the future. As one of the oldest cities in the United States, the formal process of maintaining a Philadelphia Register of Historic Places and designating historic districts plays an important role in preserving Philadelphia's unique historic resources. A careful balance must be maintained between the rights of individual property owners within historic districts and the overarching public good of maintaining these historic treasures. On balance, the Philadelphia Historical Commission has done a commendable job in using its limited resources to respond to the historic designation process. While we found no major flaws in the existing designation process, we do believe that the Historical Commission and its staff can improve its responsiveness by promoting a more "customer service" oriented approach to its regulatory role.

Over the last decade, governments across the country have engaged in a greater focus on innovative management techniques to make agencies more efficient and responsive to the public. The historic preservation process in Philadelphia can only benefit from such a focus. The recommendations contained within this report will, if implemented, enhance the Historic Commission's standing within the community, and will continue to energize the historic preservation process in the City of Philadelphia.

Appendix A: List of Task Force Members

Task Force Members

Jannie Blackwell	Philadelphia City Councilwoman, 3 rd District Task Force convener
Gary Hack	Dean, School of Design, University of Pennsylvania Task Force chair
Patricia Wilson Aden	Universal Companies
James Brown	Philadelphia Historical Commission Member
Steve Culbertson	Frankford Community Development Corporation
John Gallery	Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia
Kathleen Murray	Philadelphia Historical Commission Member
Bradley A. Krouse	Klehr, Harrison, Harvey, Branzburg & Ellers
Luis Vince Rivera	Philadelphia Historical Commission Member
John Rosenthal	Pennrose Properties
Richard W. Thom	Richard W. Thom, AIA
Scott Wilds	Philadelphia Historical Commission Member
D-L Wormley	Cartographic Modeling Lab, University of Pennsylvania

Task Force Support

Ariel Ben-Amos	Penn Praxis
Matt Conti	Penn Praxis
Laura Maas	Historic Preservation Program, University of Pennsylvania
Randall Mason	Historic Preservation Program, University of Pennsylvania
Alisa Orduna Sneed	Office of Councilwoman Jannie Blackwell
Harris Steinberg	Penn Praxis

Appendix B: Historic Preservation Task Force Public Meeting Presentations

24 June 2004: "The Historic Preservation Process."

- Jannie L. Blackwell: Historic Preservation Task Force Development
- Tom Gamba: Girard Estate Historic District Designation Process and History.
- Greg Montanero: Spruce Hill Historic Designation Applicant Background
- Tom Sugrue: Historic Designation Process
- Richard W. Thom: Old City District Historical Designation Process And History.
- Dr. Richard Tyler: Philadelphia Historical Commission History and Background.

25 October 2004: "The Impact of Historic Districts on Low-income Property Owners & Residents."

- Scott Wilds: Philadelphia Historical Commission Financial Hardship Committee as it relates to Individual Homeowners
- Randal Baron: Historic Preservation from a Philadelphia Historical Commission Staff Perspective
- John Stone: Preservation and Home Repair in Historic Districts

19 November 2004: "Reconciling Historic Preservation & Neighborhood Development Efforts"

- Pat Smith: The Neighborhood Transformation Initiative and Historic Preservation.
- Steve Culbertson: Historic Preservation and Community Development