



Montclair's HPC

Creating a successful historic preservation program

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One of my first directives when I was hired as Montclair Township's Director of Planning in 2010 was to "fix the Historic Preservation Commission." Council members were receiving complaints about how the historic preservation process increased costs to homeowners and established unreasonable limitations on property owners. Fast forward 15 years, Montclair's Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) has redefined itself as an important and valued partner in the Township's land development process. Here are a few tips on how this was accomplished.



Guests listen during a walking tour.

Clarity of Your Plan

It starts with a good plan. The Township hired a consultant to work with the Planning Board and Historic Preservation Commission to prepare a new, comprehensive Historic Preservation Plan Element of the Master Plan. This plan not only documented the Township's historic and cultural properties but also identified new historic resources that warranted future investigation. This provided a road map used by the HPC to direct additional research and resources over the next 10 years.

A good plan requires the support of a great map. The Township created an interactive Historic Inventory Viewer Map, <https://tinyurl.com/2354j85k>, with links to the various historic documents associated with individual properties. Information on the history of a property is available to the public with a simple click and is used by property owners, realtors, developers, and professionals.

Clarity in process and regulation is also essential. The HPC ordinance was revised to clearly indicate that all applications for development involving properties identified

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The Bellevue Theatre in 1922.



Bellevue Theatre today, as its next chapter is developed.

as an existing or potential historic resource in the Historic Preservation Element must be referred to the HPC for advisory review. A simplified process was created for minor applications, which includes signage, fences, and similar improvements in historic districts, which is handled by a three-person subcommittee that meets every two weeks. Finally, checklists and application forms were updated so that applicants supply all the information needed by the HPC in advance of the meeting, reducing the number of multi-meeting applications.

Unfair and arbitrary regulations were eliminated. Montclair's historic preservation ordinance required that any structure that was more than 75 years old could not be demolished without approval by the HPC. In a community where 69% of the homes are more than 75 years old, this granted enormous power to the HPC.

Furthermore, it was extremely arbitrary because it did not relate to the historic or cultural integrity of the affected structure and applicants requesting a demolition permit from the HPC had little frame of reference to consult when requesting a demolition permit. To remedy this, the Township revised the total demolition ordinance so that it applies to structures that have been evaluated as part of an historic survey. This approach provided an appropriate historic context for property owners, staff, and the HPC to evaluate applications

for total demolition.

Inter-Board Collaboration

Collaboration among the Planning Board, Board of Adjustment, and the HPC is crucial for success, harmonizing often differing viewpoints and perspectives in support of larger community goals. To support better collaboration, the Township's land use procedures ordinance was revised to require that one Planning Board member be also a member of the HPC. This ensures that HPC concerns are considered in every Planning Board application affecting a historic or potentially historic site. The HPC recently held a training session with Land Use Board members to discuss their design review process. Members of the HPC have established a good relationship with both the Planning Board and Board of Adjustment, and Board approvals often include a condition that require applicants to work with the HPC on design details.

One of the concerns about historic preservation is that equity implications can easily be overlooked in favor of strict historic integrity. The Montclair HPC recognized this and worked to balance historic considerations with broader community goals.

The HPC faced significant neighborhood opposition to creating local residential historic districts and landmarks and instead shifted its focus to establishing commercial historic districts. Montclair has six distinct

commercial districts containing an eclectic mix of historic buildings that are considered valuable community resources. Designation of four historic business districts garnered strong community support and were approved with little opposition. Over the years, the HPC has worked closely with businesses and developers to ensure that historic resources are preserved and that new construction in these business districts is of a quality and character reminiscent of the history of the area. The economic vitality of Montclair's business district is due in large part to the hard work of the HPC.

Community Preservation, Not Gentrification

While preservation can contribute to economic revitalization, it also risks making neighborhoods less affordable for lower-income families. Historic preservation must ensure that longstanding residents are not pushed out of historic neighborhoods due to preservation efforts, and that preservation is not simply another form of gentrification. Montclair's HPC is working closely with Montclair's Planning Department on a new initiative to document historic worker housing districts. The intent of this initiative is to preserve Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) created by smaller, modest worker housing through preservation efforts coupled with rehabilitation funding

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for income-eligible households.

Montclair's HPC has worked closely with the larger community to build support for Montclair's history and preservation efforts. The HPC hosts an annual awards ceremony celebrating outstanding achievements in historic preservation. These awards recognize development that exhibits outstanding preservation of historic buildings and individuals that provide extraordinary

contributions to better understand the Township's history and the preservation of Montclair's historic architectural fabric. A recent award recipient is the historic Bellevue Theatre, a key historic structure originally built in 1922 and shuttered in 2019, which is set to reopen with additional stores and new apartments. While this project required Planning Board approval, the HPC played an essential role in

Financial Commitment

An effective historic preservation process requires a financial commitment to support the research required to properly document historic resources. The Certified Local Government (CLG) program is a good source of funding for local governments that have committed to historic preservation. To be officially recognized as a CLG, municipalities must appoint a local historic preservation commission, ensure that commission members receive annual training, maintain an inventory of historic resources, and facilitate public participation in preservation. Montclair Township has used CLG funding to conduct intensive level surveys of potential historic districts identified in the Master Plan and prepare design guidelines that assist in development reviews.

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overseeing design details to ensure that its historic integrity is preserved. Community support is also garnered with a "Research Your Home's History" program where the HPC partners with the Montclair Public Library to assist homeowners discover local resources that are available to help research the history of their Montclair home or property. The HPC also works with the Montclair History Center on walking tours of various historic areas.

One final note is the importance of staff support supplemented with historic preservation experts. The Montclair HPC is staffed by a planner from the Planning Department who coordinates review of building permits and development applications to ensure that historic preservation considerations are identified early and are appropriately funneled through the review process on a timely basis. Communication of HPC timelines for submitting reports, meeting schedules and presentation requirements lets applicants know that their projects are important. 📌