

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS
ABOUT
LOCAL AND NATIONAL HISTORIC DISTRICTS DESIGNATIONS
AND DESIGN REVIEW

Q: What is a historic district?

A: A historic district is an area that contains properties under different ownership which:

1. are significant to American history, architecture, archaeology, and culture (National District) or Mt. Vernon history, architecture, archaeology and culture (Local District);
2. possess integrity of location, design, setting, materials and workmanship;
3. are associated with events that have made a significant contribution to our history or are associated with the lives of persons significant in our past;
4. embody the distinctive characteristics of a type, period, or method of construction; represent the work of a master; possess high artistic values; represent a significant and distinguishable entity whose components may lack individual distinction; or,
5. have yielded, or may be likely to yield, information important in history.

Q: What added regulations are there if my property is located in a historic district?

A: When an owner of a property within a historic district wishes to make exterior alterations, including additions and demolitions, a certificate of appropriateness is required. A certificate is issued after the Commission has reviewed the project and has determined that the proposed changes are in keeping with the character of the property and the surrounding district. The Commission evaluates each project using the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation (February, 1990). The review process generally takes less than two weeks. A project review mandatory for all projects in which exterior will be made. If a building permit is required for the work, the recommendations of the Design Review committee are mandatory. If a building permit is not required compliance with the recommendations of the review are voluntary. Work such as painting, the installation of gutters or routine maintenance, require no certificate.

Q: Who are the Historic Preservation Commissioners?

A: The 12 commission members are citizen volunteers from Mt. Vernon who have been appointed to three year terms by the City Council. They are residents of Mt. Vernon who have some expertise in history, architecture, archaeology, or other related field. Any citizen can apply to become a member of the Historic Preservation Commission as vacancies arise.

Q: Does the Historic Preservation Commission have a track record of approving or disapproving application for certificates of appropriateness?

A: Although this is the first year the Design Review process has been operating in Mt. Vernon, the Commission has so far approved most applications. The Commission will work with individuals to revise their plans if necessary so that the proposed alterations to a property are appropriate and in keeping with the character of the property and the surrounding district.

Q: When should I apply for a building permit and certificate of appropriateness?

A: The submission should be made to City Hall as part of the building permit application process. Individuals contemplating modifications or additions to their property are encouraged, however, to set up a preliminary review with the Mount Vernon Historic Preservation Commission at one of their regular meetings. The preliminary design review session can save time and money by making sure the proposed changes are acceptable before applying for a permit.

- Q: Who makes the decision regarding a “Certificate of Appropriateness”?**
A: The Mount Vernon Historic Preservation Commission will meet to review and rule on applications. Three members of the commission constitutes a quorum for considering an application.
- Q: How long will it take me to obtain a “Certificate of Appropriateness”?**
A: No applicant will have to wait longer than 15 days before a decision is made by the Historic Preservation Commission. The Commission meets on the first Saturday of each month. Meetings may be scheduled more frequently provided the demand for Certificates of Appropriateness warrant additional meetings.
- Q: If I don’t like the decision of the Commission regarding my remodeling project, what can I do?**
A: Decisions regarding historic districts may be appealed to the Board of Adjustment, then to the City Council and ultimately, to Linn County District Court.
- Q: If my property lies within a historic district, will I have to fix it up or restore it?**
A: No. Having a property designated does not prevent private property owners from making changes or force owners to make improvements to their property. It does not limit the use of the building, require owners to erect plaques, or to make the property accessible or open to the public.
- Q: Are there any restrictions on the sale of a property in a historic district?**
A: No.
- Q: Are there any restrictions on whether my house or property can be rented or leased?**
A: No.
- Q: Will the City tell me what color I must paint my house?**
A: No. Painting is not subject to review by the Historic Preservation Commission.
- Q: Must I use old or historical materials for my project?**
A: No. In order to minimize economic hardship and provide maximum flexibility in compliance with the guidelines new materials which simulate old materials can be used. These include steel, aluminum, vinyl, and other synthetic materials.
- Q: If my property is designated, will I have to get permission of the Historic Preservation Commission to landscape the property?**
A: No. It should be noted, however, the other City ordinances may control this type of construction.
- Q: Are there any benefits if my property is located in a historic district?**
A: District designation will provide you with a limited amount of protection from inappropriate development of property adjacent to yours. It may also help to increase the value of your property.
- Q: Will the value of my property decrease or increase if designated?**
A: Many considerations determine the value of a home, but locally and nationally designated and protected properties have proven to increased in desirability and value.

Q: If my house is in a historic district, do I have any special privileges?

A: Yes. You help increase the public awareness of historic buildings and promote a sense of pride in past achievements. Historic districts offer protection from inappropriate demolitions, alterations or construction by a neighbor. In the past, Federal and State grants have targeted older houses, and particularly older houses that help make up a historic district.

Process for Designation of a Historic District

1. Historic Preservation Commission prepares background and survey information concerning significance of an area, building or site to American and Mt. Vernon history, archaeology and culture. Including information concerning integrity of location, design, setting, materials and workmanship; association with lives of persons significant to our past; distinctive characteristics of types of construction; and possible yield of information important in history.
2. Advance mailing of notice to all property owners in the proposed historic district advising them of a public hearing.
3. Historic Preservation Commission holds a public hearing on proposed historic district designation.
4. Historic Preservation Commission report recommending designation of a historic district is submitted to the Planning and Zoning (P & Z) Commission.
5. Copy of report is submitted to State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO). Comments from SHPO must be received before action is taken by P & Z.
6. Within 60 days of receiving the report from the Historic Preservation Commission and comments from the SHPO, P & Z shall submit its recommendations to the City Council.
 - a. P & Z may approve, disapprove, or modify the proposed designation.
 - b. P & Z must notify Historic Preservation Commission of modifications.
 - c. If P & Z modifies, the City shall forward modifications to the SHPO for review.
 - d. SHPO comments must be received by the City before a public hearing before the City Council is held. Such comments must be available for public review.
7. The City Council provides notice of hearing and conducts a public hearing on an ordinance to designate a historic district.
 - a. The City Council may adopt, reject, or refer the proposal to the Historic Preservation Commission for modification.
 - b. If the Council refers the matter back to the Historic Preservation Commission for modification, the requirements of paragraphs 2 through 6 must be repeated.

Note: For further details, refer to the Mt. Vernon Code of Ordinances. The Code empowers the Commission to conduct studies for identification and designation of historic districts on its own initiative. It also provides for the procedures for designating historic districts.