

Ten Top Misconceptions about the Proposed Newburyport Local Historic District

Our thanks to the Newburyporters who wrote comments for the 2008 survey. The responses revealed misconceptions about local historic districts in general and the proposed Newburyport Local Historic District that the LHD Study Committee wishes to address.

1. Property owners have done a great job restoring their buildings. We are doing a good job without a local historic district.

The great success of downtown and neighborhood renovations from the 1970s to 1990s has created the downside of real estate pressure – too little property in a highly desirable area. For the past decade, the area has experienced tear-downs, out-sized additions, and incompatible buildings on extant lots which have diminished the historic nature building by building, block by block. Some renovation projects have removed or incorrectly restored historic fabric. Newburyport’s nationally recognized architecture now needs additional protection.

2. The people who buy homes in Newburyport love history, have taste and money, and won’t harm the property.

A high-end renovation project does not necessarily ensure the historic integrity of a property. Architects and contractors, unfamiliar or unsympathetic with historic structure rehabilitation and wishing to provide the most up-to-date amenities, may recommend extensive removal of historic fabric as the only feasible alternative and may propose incompatible additions.

New ownership may involve outside interests not familiar with Newburyport’s history and character. Established guidelines inform the new property owners and their renovation team how to rehabilitate the property.

3. An innovative development like the Tannery couldn’t be done under a local historic district.

New development is permitted in a local historic district. It need not replicate historic styles, and contemporary architecture which blends with the current historic streetscapes would be encouraged.

4. Newburyport should be a “green” community. A local historic district would hinder that effort.

The proposed guidelines address concerns such as solar panels and window replacements. Increasingly the design community is bringing together “green” and historic preservation interests with historic preservationists reminding property owners that renovating an old house is the ultimate “recycling.”

5. “Self-appointed” extremists would control the future Local Historic District Commission.

The survey revealed confusion about how the Commission members would be selected. The mayor appoints the candidates with the City Council approving them – just as other boards such as the Zoning Board of Appeals and the Conservation Commission are appointed. The Massachusetts LHD statute suggests architects, realtors, historians, and residents as appointees. It is expected that the majority will be residents/property owners of the district.

Horror stories on the Internet relate tales of commissions unwilling to compromise. The composition of the proposed district (7 members, 4 alternates) should minimize the power of the chairperson. It is in the best interests of the commission to work with property owners so that the building is renovated in a timely fashion and that legal costs on both sides are minimized.

6. A local historic district attempts to freeze architecture at a set moment in time. I don't want to live in a museum.

Massachusetts has many active business and residential areas in local historic districts. Nearby communities include Haverhill (the Washington Street District), West Newbury (around the Training Field on Rt. 113), and Rowley (the Main Street District on Rt. 1).

7. The review should be voluntary.

The projects most in need of advice are often the projects least likely to use that advice. Project managers not comfortable with historic restoration may wish to expedite the planned project rather than to consult voluntarily with the commission and rethink the process.

8. I had held property in other historic districts and found the process lengthy and frustrating.

The Newburyport Study Committee has strived to lessen the burden on property owners by eliminating review elements included in other LHDs such as driveways and walks, gutters, and small outbuildings. It also exempts buildings less than seventy-five years old. The commission will meet twice a month to move the process more quickly; other LHD commissions meet once a month.

9. A local historic district would make it more difficult for owners with limited incomes to live in their homes.

The local historic district cannot force homeowners to maintain their properties. In addition, the homeowner is not required to remove vinyl siding, etc. The commission will urge non-profit organizations to provide energy-saving renovations to owners with limited means. Effective restoration does not necessarily require the most expensive materials or construction.

10. A local historic district creates more "neighbor vs. neighbor" situations.

The Commission and LHD guidelines provide a framework to the property owner restoring the property and to the neighbors. There are clear expectations and a public forum to express intentions and concerns.