

Portland's Comprehensive Plan: Historic Resources Policy Updates



Historic Resources in Portland

Historic resources – residential and commercial buildings, districts, bridges, public art, landscapes, etc. -- are structures and places that connect the past to the present. They play a vital role in defining Portland's sense of place and the character of its neighborhoods. Historic resources include not just designated landmarks and districts, but the established fabric of the city's neighborhoods -- its older buildings, structures and streetscapes that are central to the city's distinctiveness, culture, and quality of life. In terms of age, more than 60% of the city's buildings are at least 50 years old, and 35% are at least 75 years old, creating a vast pool of potentially significant historic properties. Portland has more than 670 individual historic landmarks and 20 historic and conservation districts, representing approximately 5% of properties citywide.

However, many areas of the city are underserved by historic preservation research, policies and protections. In places expected to experience higher density and development, there may be risk to the existing historic built environment and landscape. As Portland grows and changes, additional efforts are needed to evaluate, protect, and preserve historic and culturally significant resources citywide. Preserving our city's historic resources and cultural history can foster development that is socially, economically and environmentally sustainable. The city and its community partners will need to prioritize preservation efforts and be strategic about which projects to pursue. As new plans, goals and policies are developed under the Comprehensive Plan update, historic and cultural resources and their role in defining neighborhood typologies and pattern areas should be used as a fundamental layer in determining "areas of stability and change" and other urban form and physical planning components.

Policy Direction for Historic Resources

Goal 12, Urban Design, was adopted in 1993. Goal 12 includes policies related to Portland's character and sense of identity, including Historic Preservation. Policies and objectives under 12.3 Historic Preservation need updating to include new priorities and strategies for historic resources. The Portland Plan (April 2012) and the Historic Resources Background Report (2009) provide some guidance for updating Comprehensive Plan policies and objectives. The Portland Historic Landmarks Commission and stakeholders in the Central City 2035 process have also identified issues and provided direction on new priorities.

Main Topic Areas Requiring Updates

1. Preservation Strategy

"Preserve the distinctive characteristics and history of Portland's neighborhoods and districts when making decisions regarding growth, urban design and the design of improvements." (*Portland Plan Guiding Policy H-7*)

Background: Although existing Comprehensive Plan language generally addresses these objectives, updated language is needed to acknowledge priorities and direct future preservation planning efforts.

New approach:

- Growth, infill, and compatibility strategies/tools are needed to integrate new development into Portland's urban fabric and patterns, prioritizing development that fills in vacant and underutilized gaps while preserving and complementing historic resources.

2. Cultural and social history, and preservation equity

“Protect and enhance defining places and features of neighborhood centers, including historic and culturally significant resources, with special attention to redevelopment areas and diverse communities.” (*Guiding Policy H-20 in the Portland Plan*)

“In coordination with neighborhoods, begin a phased inventory of historic and culturally significant resources, and develop a strategy to preserve key resources. Give priority to areas in the Central City, in Centers and Corridors, or other areas likely to experience redevelopment pressure.” (*Portland Plan 5-year Action Plan #112*)

Background: In the existing Comp Plan, there are no specific references to equity and diversity as related to historic preservation, or to the value of social and cultural history. There is implicit guidance in the Portland Plan on this. Promoting the cultural and social value of historic resources should be a new priority.

New approach:

- Focus on geographic areas “under-served” by historic landmarks, districts, research, protections.
- Identify areas with “emerging” historic resources (e.g., modern-era and cultural resources).
- Promote awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity and social meanings/significance of historic places and their role in enhancing community character and sense of place.
- Foster inclusive historic preservation and public history activities that embrace Portland's diverse communities, cultures and history.
- Preserve and celebrate publicly owned resources as our common civic heritage.

3. Historic resource conservation and sustainable development

“Promote energy and resource conservation at a district scale in neighborhood hubs through compact development, rehabilitation of existing buildings and energy efficiencies.” (*Guiding Policy H-22 in the Portland Plan*)

Background: In the existing Comp Plan, there are no specific references to resource conservation, although adaptive reuse is mentioned under Goal 4 Housing and Goal 5 Economic Development.

New approach:

- Adapt and reuse historic buildings to conserve natural resources, reduce waste, and model stewardship of the built environment and community assets.
- Recognize the complimentary goals of historic preservation and green building to leverage resources to retain and restore buildings.
- Increase the long-term viability of historic structures and improve public safety through seismic and energy-efficiency retrofits.