

Summary Notes

Historic Resources Code Project Roundtable 4:

“Local District Designation: An Alternative to the National Register?”

Tuesday, February 6, 6:00pm-7:30pm

North Portland Library, 512 N. Killingsworth St.

On Tuesday, February 6, 2018, the Bureau of Planning and Sustainability held its fourth public roundtable for the Historic Resources Code Project (HRCP) at the North Portland Library. The last of the City’s initial HRCP input sessions, this event challenged participants to imagine new historic district designation options at the local level. Approximately forty Portlanders were in attendance.

Historic Resources Program Manager Brandon Spencer-Hartle opened the event with a technical discussion of Portland’s current historic district situation, explaining the City’s reliance on National Register designation and opportunities to reintroduce and refine local designation alternatives. After describing a number of potential regulatory tools, Spencer-Hartle encouraged participants to think about how two different local district designation options could serve the diverse character and needs of Portland’s historic areas.

Following the introductory presentation, roundtable participants divided into three breakout groups facilitated by Bureau of Planning and Sustainability and Bureau of Development Services staff. Groups’ first topic of conversation centered on designation of local historic districts. Many attendees were excited by the prospect of a nomination and designation process independent from the National Register of Historic Places, and suggestions for local process revealed interest in community-initiated nominations, designation by the affirmative vote of 50% or 75% of residents in a proposed district, and consideration of social and cultural history. Participants also asked that the City consider the economic and social impact of creating historic districts, particularly in the context of housing availability.

At the midpoint of the event, participants shifted to a discussion of the protection measures that may apply to two local designations. Facilitators introduced the concept of two local designation types: the Local Historic District, intended to protect contributing historic resources to the highest degree and to ensure that all change is deferential to the district’s historic character; and the Local Conservation District, intended to maintain a designated area’s unique design features while accommodating flexibility and change. Using a list of current and potential management tools as a guide, roundtable participants described possible regulations that would best serve each designation type. There was general support for a district-specific approach to creating design guidelines and standards and a consensus that review of alterations, additions, demolitions, and new construction should be less rigorous in Local Conservation Districts than in Local Historic Districts. For instance, many participants advocated for an onerous and expensive path to demolition in Local Historic Districts, one requiring a City Council hearing and/or a hefty fee paid into a fund supporting future preservation projects; in contrast, securing a demolition permit for a historic structure in a Local Conservation District might only require staff review, a long delay period, and/or deconstruction of the resource. In the case of additions and new construction, buildings in Local Conservation Districts might have more flexibility within certain building form standards, while context would more carefully prescribe change in Local Historic Districts.

However, as compared to the regulations that apply to National Register Historic District today, many participants felt that the review of minor changes should be less costly and less-heavily regulated in both Local Historic Districts and Local Conservation Districts. Staff notes from each group's conversation are transcribed below.

After forty-five minutes of conversation, participants reconvened to share summaries of their group's discussions. As this roundtable marked the end of the initial public comment period for the Historic Resources Code Project, attendees were encouraged to submit final remarks via an online survey or a paper comment form available at the event. All public comment must be received by Monday, February 19, 2018 for consideration in the initial code drafting process. The City will announce additional opportunities for public comment after the release of a discussion draft in the late spring.

Transcribed Notes (captured verbatim from roundtable chart pads)

Discussion Topic #1: Designation

Group 1 (Brandon Spencer-Hartle, BPS, and Jill DeCoursey, BDS):

- Criteria:
 - No district designation w/in ¼ mile of transit corridors
 - Compliment env't needs—allow development in concentrated areas
 - People want to live in historic areas/blds
 - So conflict with high density
 - Is it a historic area, 50% older buildings
 - Density—different types (tall or not)
 - Scale/pattern/rhythm of district
 - Based on neighborhoods, neigh. Characteristics, dominant house type
 - Think to the future/new future technologies
 - Build in flexibility for efficiency
- Who can nominate?
 - Affirmation, yes votes should do the work
 - 75% of owners consent (100% too much)
 - Consistent w/ Nat'l Register
 - Are renters, new owners included? Out of town owners?
 - Depends on type of resource
- Who should nominate?
 - Neighborhood org.
 - Any group in neigh.
- Focus on strength of application
- Should we have option for non-contiguous resource?
- Have a city facilitated conversation to guide neighborhood conversation
 - + a pre-app or open forum
- Vote on district should include larger group including renters
- Start w/ Nat'l Register process

Group 2 (Nicholas Starin, BPS, and Hillary Adam, BDS):

- Race/gender/soc. equity
- NR criteria are good starting place
 - w/ local tweaks?
- Discontinuous options ok
- SF Legacy business example
- When outside architecture ID cultural . . .
- Less than 50 years should be considered
- Flexible
- Preserving bldgs. vs. stories
 - Who is managing this change?

- Clarity
- Brewery blocks, historic function still clear but adapted
- Who nominates?
 - Certified letter—need more accessible options
 - Role for renters important
 - BPS can nominate, curatorial role
 - Some role for residents
 - City Council?
 - Interest group → U of O Pres. Prog., conduit thru city
 - No owner consent
 - Opt-out good balance
 - Perceptions of bias if it's BPS
 - Interests of those not supportive
 - Appeal option
- Community impacts
 - Economic value—quantify it
 - Measure impact of affordable housing in historic areas
 - Other values should be part of evaluation
 - Criteria gets you in door, then evaluate

Group 3 (Megan Walker, BDS, and Caity Ewers, BPS):

- Consider existing N. R. criteria in determining significance—architecture but also events, people, culture
- Criteria driven by desires of the community
- Community-initiated nominations
- Need to consider process for individual listings too—can the public have a say? How?
- Purpose—preserves and communicates story
 - Accessible history
- Should be an opt-in process
 - But—if “yes” to designation isn’t the default, will fewer people support designation?
- Renters are committed to their community and should have a say
- Consider Comp Plan goals in designations
 - Robust analysis to determine if Historic District designation could support long-term goals

Discussion Topic #2: Management Tools for Local Historic and Local Conservation Districts

Group 1 (Brandon Spencer-Hartle, BPS, and Jill DeCoursey, BDS):

- Local Historic Districts:
 - Give it guts!
 - Context > deference
 - New not need be bland
 - Stronger public space protection
 - Weigh significance of indiv. property before demolition → working class history

- Def. of demo.
- Menu of protections to pick from
 - What makes sense for district?
 - District-specific approach
- Cost burdens in Hist. Dist.
 - Affordability concerns
 - Easier minor improvements
- Too high bar
- Viability re: cost to city to admin.
- Predictability → easy info
- Lower fees
- Increase info available (about own house)
- Prevent displacement
- Local Conservation Districts:
 - Concern that is toothless
 - Accumulating growth + change, greater flexibility
 - Stepping stone to H.D.
 - Honorific status
 - Extend demolition delay 180/200 day?
 - Connection between demo delay + new project
 - Mitigation—if demo → fees go to community
 - Enforcement of demolition rules
 - Ability to make changes behind the front façade
 - Look at districts how we look at plan districts
 - Create menu of items to work w/
 - Needs educational component
 - Needs carrot to incentive
 - Design standards to match character of neighborhood
 - Consistency
 - Neighborhoods should know what to expect
 - Fees comparable to other cities
 - All districts should [have] access to same resources, independent of wealth

Group 2 (Nicholas Starin, BPS, and Hillary Adam, BDS):

- Local Historic Districts:
 - It should “cost” (time + \$) a lot to demolish—stick
 - More flexibility for uses—carrot
 - Delay is a boondoggle
 - Council or PHLC review of demo
 - Some things should be allowed through standards, other require review
 - Is this more about architecture
 - If so, hearing + discretion for alterations important
 - Back of house/bldg. less important, this is about how people experience public realm, Sec 106 examp.

- City celebrate success, E.G. successful addition, show what we want
- Door + window conversation so reactive right now, landmines, sustainability goals
- Residential vs. commercial district, different rules (both)
- Local Conservation Districts:
 - Less strict demo reg. but not just demo delay
 - Fee but less review for demo
 - Delay not effective
 - More things through standards
 - Flexible for non-contrib.
 - Do you need to distinguish between contr. = N.C.
 - Keep building—gentle densification but flexible within it + ADUs → also in H.D.
 - Maybe more flex for large additions
 - Dormers on attic (both)
 - Certified vendor program (both)
 - Flexible for solar, alt. energy (both)
 - Façadism ok in conserve.
 - Incentivize people to care; our tools need to do this; too large fees

Group 3 (Megan Walker, BDS, and Caity Ewers, BPS):

- Local Historic Districts:
 - Demo review
 - If approved → deconstruct + salvage materials
 - Broaden the deconstruction requirement to include all buildings in district
 - Penalty + fee (in that order)
 - Discretionary review of alterations/additions
 - (less scrutiny in Districts than to individual Landmarks)
 - Maybe standards for some changes
 - District-specific design guidelines
 - Create as a requirement of nomination
 - New construction should be very context-driven
- Local Conservation Districts:
 - Demo review
 - 120-day delay is only an inconvenience to developers—replace w/ review
 - If approved—deconstruct + salvage materials
 - Broaden deconstruction requirement—all buildings in districts
 - Prescriptive review track for alterations/additions
 - “clear and objective standards”
 - District-specific standards
 - Create as part of nomination
 - Flexible criteria for significance
 - Recognize things other than architecture
 - New construction according to prescriptive standards (buildings form, massing, etc.)