

Survey of Local Historic District Residents

About Their Experiences with the Brookline Preservation Commission

Spring 2009

Report Summary

May 17, 2009 - Final

A) Reasons for Survey

Over the past several years, it has become apparent that some property owners have encountered unanticipated challenges when attempting to renovate or enlarge their homes or undertake new construction within Brookline's local historic districts. Despite the Preservation Commission's efforts to create guidelines, rules, and procedures for repair or restoration, there have been sufficient instances in which homeowners encountered difficulties to justify efforts to address these concerns. It was decided by representatives of Brookline's Local Historic Districts (LHDs) and the Preservation Commission (PC) that LHD property owners be surveyed in order to help identify the problems and develop strategies to address them. In the winter of 2008/2009 we, as representatives from the LHDs, partnered with PC staff and the PC Chair and Vice Chair, to form an LHD/PC ad hoc committee and compose a survey. In March of 2009 that survey was distributed. We had the expert advice and guidance of an independent professional researcher, Karen Jacobsen, a professor at Tufts University, throughout the process. We are hopeful that the survey results and our recommendations will be used to promote thoughtful discussions regarding the current practices of the Commission and to effect improvements.

B) Results & Recommendations

The Committee believes the statistical information and comments from the survey warrant recommendations for improvement of the undertakings of the Preservation Committee. To create recommendations for improvement 115 written comments from qualitative questions #10-#23 (agree, no opinion, disagree) were reviewed and coded. Of these, approximately 50% were selected as valuable to the Results & Recommendations process* and were classified into six general categories.

The results were:

| code | type | responses |
|------|---|-----------|
| a | money & expense burden | 6 |
| b | guidelines not clear/arbitrary | 7 |
| d | decide on rules not aesthetics | 6 |
| e | disrespectful and unprofessional manner | 17 |
| f | unsatisfactory process | 22 |
| g | inconsistencies/enforcement | 4 |

*Approximately 45% were considered not to be specifically germane to the process of discovering areas of improvement for the Preservation Commission and approximately 5% were considered supportive of and/or positive towards the PC and thus self evident and not requiring improvement. Some responses were awarded two or more codes as the remarks touched on multiple categories.

By priority, the Preservation Commission should be encouraged to:

1. Recognize that about two-fifths of respondents found the process to be unsatisfactory;
2. Improve the quality of its interaction with applicants;
3. Make decisions based on guidelines and historic preservation principles and avoid debating personal aesthetics;
4. Consider financial impact on applicants;
5. Review/revise Guidelines with the goal of eliminating confusion;
6. Ensure execution/implementation of approved design.

The Committee makes the following recommendations to the PC:

1. Make best efforts to ensure staff has been in dialogue with applicant about Design Guidelines and their relevancy to proposed plans prior to scheduling their hearing;
2. Run meetings with professional decorum and according to Roberts Rules of Order and encourage the principle of balanced participation;
3. Provide orientation and training for Commission members and alternates (particularly those new to the Commission) re Historic Preservation Standards (generally the ones used by the Department of the Interior) and BPC's Design Guidelines;
4. Reference specific Design Guideline(s) when rendering decisions;
5. Work towards consensus on all votes so that decisions are clear and provide strong direction;
6. Consider as a higher priority the need for energy-saving measures;
7. Institute public comment session at start of every Commission meeting;
8. Consider term limits and/or avoid long-standing terms;
9. Consider a Round Table hearing format;
10. Self review annually or request guidance from an outside evaluator;
11. Provide comment sheet to all applicants/design professionals upon completion of final hearing;
12. Deploy Brookline Access TV to televise hearings and/or make an audio recording of hearings;
13. Meet more frequently during construction season;

The Committee offers these additional suggestions for consideration

14. Better utilize its website to educate the public about its mission and provide links to useful information (e.g. NHS Preservation Briefs, Historic New England, etc.)
15. Engage real estate agents to make sure clients have LHD requirements early in the purchase process;
16. Develop an online application process, ideally with job tracking capabilities fully integrated with the other Town Departments;
17. Engage the LHD's or the neighborhood associations to help raise awareness of the PC's mission and to develop educational opportunities (e.g. "welcome wagon" packages for new residents; workshops on repairing windows, historically sensitive energy saving retrofits, etc) and should consider using Friends of the PC funds to provide grants for these activities.

C) Thanks

The PC/LHD Committee would like to thank Jim Bachelor, Sheri Flagler, Greer Hardwicke and PC Staff, Dr. Karen Jacobsen and all the LHD members who contributed to this initiative.