

Step by Step Guide to Obtaining Historical Commission Certificates and Neighborhood Conservation District Commission Certificates



City of Cambridge

A Word from Robert W. Healy *Cambridge City Manager*

The City of Cambridge is dedicated to maintaining its competitiveness and desirability as *the* place to live, work, and do business. Cambridge's continual growth and development depend, in part, upon the quality and timeliness of the information and services delivered by the City. This pamphlet has been prepared to assist residents, businesses, and developers in moving through the City's regulatory processes as easily as possible, by removing unnecessary confusion, delays, and costs. This pamphlet is one in a series, and is part of the City's ongoing effort to sustain livable neighborhoods and a positive business climate.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Robert W. Healy". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

**Robert W. Healy,
City Manager**

This brochure explains how designated historic properties in Cambridge are regulated by the Cambridge Historical Commission. It describes the process to obtain the required certificates to alter designated historic properties and also explains how to obtain a demolition permit.

What is the Cambridge Historical Commission and what does it do?

The Cambridge Historical Commission was established in 1963 to protect historic properties in Cambridge, mark historic sites, advise property owners on preservation issues, and research and publish information about the history and architecture of the City. The Historical Commission, supported by a professional staff, is made up of district residents and professionals in the areas of architecture, landscape architecture, law, real estate, and history. The Historical Commission is responsible for administering the City's historic districts, landmarks, and easement properties city-wide, as well as demolition reviews outside the neighborhood conservation districts (NCD). There are three NCDs in Cambridge, and each NCD has its own separate commission. All Commission members and alternates are appointed by the City Manager and confirmed by the City Council.

What legislation enables historic preservation in the City?

Both state and local regulations protect the City's historic districts, NCDs, and landmarks. A state statute, Massachusetts General Law Chapter 40C, and a local ordinance, Article I of Chapter 2.78 of the Cambridge Municipal Code, guide the administration of historic districts. NCDs and landmarks are protected by a local ordinance, Article III of Chapter 2.78, and by the individual council orders that establish the NCDs and landmarks. Article II of Chapter 2.78 establishes a procedure for the Historical Commission to review demolition permits city-wide.

What are historic districts, neighborhood conservation districts, and protected landmarks ?

Historic Districts - There are two historic districts in Cambridge, the Old Cambridge Historic District and the Fort Washington Historic District. The core of the Old Cambridge Historic District is Cambridge Common and Brattle Street, known for its fine collection of residential architecture. The Fort Washington Historic District, on Waverly Street in Cambridgeport, is a remnant of the earthwork fortifications that protected Cambridge during the American Revolution.

Neighborhood Conservation Districts (NCD) - These districts are comprised of groups of buildings that are architecturally and historically distinctive. There are three NCDs in Cambridge: Mid Cambridge, Half Crown, and Avon Hill.

- The Mid Cambridge NCD is bordered by Prospect Street to the east, Prescott Street to the west, Kirkland Street and the Somerville city line to the north, and Massachusetts Avenue to the south.

- The Half Crown NCD is located southwest of Harvard Square and is approximately bordered by Hilliard Street to the east, Hawthorne Street to the west, Fuller Place to the north, and Memorial Drive to the south.
- The Avon Hill NCD, near Porter Square, is approximately bordered by Raymond Street to the west, Massachusetts Avenue to the east, Upland Road to the north, and Linnaean Street to the south.

Each NCD is administered by its own Commission which is empowered to approve any new construction, demolition, or alteration that will be visible from a public way.

Landmarks - A landmark is an individual place, structure, feature, or object that is historically or architecturally significant by itself or because it is associated with events, persons, or trends significant in the history of the City. Protected landmarks include City Hall and many prominent buildings on Massachusetts Avenue. In addition, some properties are protected by preservation easements.

What properties are subject to Commission review?

The Historical Commission maintains a street list of designated historic properties. This list is available at the Historical Commission, the Inspectional Services Department, the City Clerk's Office, and on-line through the City's home page (<http://www.ci.cambridge.ma.us>).

In addition, any structure over 50 years old is subject to the demolition delay ordinance, the purpose of which is to provide an opportunity to consider preservation alternatives to demolition. The Historical Commission archives provide dates of construction for all properties in the City. The staff should be consulted early in the permitting process to determine if a property is subject to the terms of the demolition delay ordinance.

Applications to demolish utilitarian structures, such as residential garages, do not generally require a public hearing, however, they do require a review and sign-off from the Historical Commission staff.

Properties and structures found to be significant by the staff will require a Commission hearing prior to issuance of a demolition permit. If after a public hearing the Commission determines that a property or a structure is significant and "preferably preserved," a six month delay to the issuance of a building permit may be imposed. In rare cases, further action may be taken to permanently protect a significant and "preferably preserved" building or structure through landmark designation or donation of a preservation easement.

What role does the Commission have in the issuance of building permits?

If a property is located in a historic district or is a protected landmark, the property owner must obtain approval from the Historical Commission as

part of the building permit application process. If a property is located in a neighborhood conservation district, the approval comes from one of the NCD Commissions. No work can be undertaken, nor can a building permit be issued, until the appropriate Commission has provided one of the following Certificates: Appropriateness, Non-Applicability, or Hardship.

What is a Certificate of Appropriateness?

A Certificate of Appropriateness allows alterations that are historically and/or architecturally appropriate to be made to a structure's exterior features. A certificate is always necessary to obtain a building permit for work on a designated historic property and assures that proposed alterations comply with the historic aspects, architectural significance, or distinctive character of the building. The certificate incorporates plans and specifications submitted as evidence of the proposed work, and these combined materials form a binding understanding between the applicant and the Commission on how changes can be made to the exterior of the building.

Certificates are valid for 6 months from the date of issuance. They can be extended one or more times for a period of no more than 90 days each, on the written approval of the chairman of the Commission.

What is a Certificate of Non-Applicability?

A Certificate of Non-Applicability (CNA) is issued to signify that the proposed work lies outside a Commission's jurisdiction. CNAs can often be issued by an Historical Commission staff member immediately upon receipt of an application and without a public hearing. Typically, CNAs are issued for in-kind repairs, ordinary maintenance, or alterations (such as to interiors) which are not visible from a public way.

What is a Certificate of Hardship?

If a Commission determines that denial of an application would cause substantial hardship to the applicant, financial or otherwise, and that the work may be approved without substantial detriment to the district or the building, a Certificate of Hardship may be issued. Hardship certificates are generally issued on a temporary basis and for the life of a particular applicant's use of the property, such as for the installation of features related to accessibility for persons with disabilities in a private residence.

How do I apply for a certificate?

Applications for all certificates are available at the Cambridge Historical Commission office. Instructions for completing the application and a list of required attachments are included on the form. Completed applications should be returned to the Historical Commission office, including those for properties in NCDs. Deadlines for submitting applications may be obtained by calling the Historical Commission.

How does the Commission conduct its review?

Applications for Certificates of Appropriateness or Hardship in historic districts, for landmarks, and for certain proposals in NCDs require a public hearing. Notices of Commission meetings are posted at the City Clerk's office along with deadlines for submitting applications for consideration. Abutters to the property, the Planning Board, the City Clerk, and any others deemed to be affected are notified of public hearings at least 14 days in advance. In addition, the Commission is required to advertise its hearings in a newspaper of general circulation at least 14 days in advance.

What are the standards for the Commission's review?

The general standards for review include:

- the historic and architectural value and significance of the site or structure,
- the general design, arrangement, texture and material of the features involved,
- the relation of these features to the surrounding area, and
- in the case of new construction, the size and shape of the construction in relation to its lot and surroundings.

In addition, there are specific standards for review for each NCD, landmark, and historic district.

Commissions can set stricter standards for development than those allowed by zoning. However, interiors and aspects of the property not visible from a public way cannot be regulated. Commissions also rely on broad standards contained in state and federal guidelines, including the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation.

Neighborhood conservation districts generally incorporate other criteria specifically tailored to the district. For further information, consult the council orders and application forms for each NCD.

How does the demolition delay ordinance affect property owners?

Article II of Chapter 2.78 provides for consideration of preservation alternatives to demolition for properties 50 years or older and not otherwise protected. The City's Inspectional Services Department (ISD) issues the demolition permit, but the permit process is coordinated with the Historical Commission. The Historical Commission staff should be contacted directly for guidance on their demolition review process. The steps are as follows:

1. After picking up a demolition permit application from ISD, the form is completed and signed by a licensed builder and the

property owner. The applicant takes the completed form to the Historical Commission to obtain a sign-off. The Historical Commission has up to five days to make a determination of a structure's significance.

2. Permit applications for properties found to be not significant can be approved administratively by the Historical Commission staff. In this case, the applicant can proceed in obtaining other departmental sign-offs listed in the application, including the Police, Water, and Fire Departments. If the structure is found to be significant, the Historical Commission will hold a public hearing within 45 days of receipt of the demolition permit application.
3. The Commission will prepare a background report on the structure for the hearing at which the applicant is invited to discuss the reasons for the demolition and the nature of the replacement project, if any. The Commission weighs the merits of the proposed replacement against the significance of the existing structure.
4. If the Commission finds that the structure is not preferably preserved, then the demolition permit is allowed to proceed to other departments for approval. If the Commission decides in favor of preserving the structure, the demolition permit application can be withheld for up to six months, and the time may be used to explore alternative plans to the demolition. Demolition permits are not issued to the applicant by ISD until all necessary approvals have been obtained for any proposed replacement structures.

How can the Historical Commission be contacted?

HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Hours: Mon. 8:30am -8:00pm, Tues.-Thurs. 8:30am-5:00pm, Fri. 8:30am-12:00 noon

Lombardi Building, 831 Massachusetts Avenue, 2nd Floor - Paul Trudeau

Phone: (617) 349-4687; Fax (617) 349-3116; TTY: (617) 492-6112

Contact all City departments at the City's website:
www.cambridgema.gov

To obtain a demolition permit application, contact:

INSPECTIONAL SERVICES DEPARTMENT (ISD)

Hours: 8:00AM - 5:00PM

Lombardi Building, 831 Massachusetts Avenue, 1st Floor - ISD Clerk

Phone: (617)349-6100; Fax (617)349-6132; TTY: (617)349-6112

City Manager

Robert W. Healy

Deputy City Manager

Richard C. Rossi

City Council

Mayor: Henrietta Davis

Vice Mayor: E. Denise Simmons

Councillor Leland Cheung

Councillor Marjorie C. Decker

Councillor Craig A. Kelley

Councillor David P. Maher

Councillor Kenneth E. Reeves

Councillor Timothy Toomey, Jr.

Councillor Minka vanBeuzekom

The Community Development Department of the City of Cambridge has prepared a Guide to City Offices and Permitting containing a city-wide map of all permit issuing agencies, their contact information, and comprehensive listing of permits issued by various City departments. If you would like to receive a copy, please call (617) 349-4600. Other permit brochure titles currently available by dialing the same number include:

Step-by-Step Guide to Curb Cuts

Step-by-Step Guide to Building Permits

Step-by-Step Guide to Fire Safety

Step-by-Step Guide to Obtaining Permits and
Licenses Required to Hold a Special Event

Step-by-Step Guide to Starting a Business in Cambridge

The City of Cambridge does not discriminate on the basis of disability. The City will provide auxiliary aids and services, written materials in alternative formats, and reasonable modifications in policies and procedures to persons with disabilities upon request.

The information contained in this document may not be complete or fully up to date and is subject to change. To confirm information regarding a permitting process, contact the appropriate City of Cambridge department(s). This document should be used strictly for informational purposes. All other uses require the written permission of the City of Cambridge.