

The Lower Common Neighborhood Conservation District Study Report - Summary

The Lower Common Neighborhood Conservation District (NCD) Study was initiated by petition of about 150 registered voters living in the area bounded by Massachusetts Avenue, Linnaean Street, Garden Street and Chauncy Street. The petition responded to neighborhood concerns about inappropriate rehabilitation of older houses and apartment buildings and the future of the Radcliffe Quad. The Cambridge Historical Commission held a public hearing on October 7, 2004 and voted to accept the petition and initiate the study.

The City Manager appointed the Study Committee on January 31, 2005. Between January 2005 and November 2006, the Study Committee met on 39 occasions to discuss its recommendations. It held seven public information sessions, conducted a walking tour, and published a newsletter. The meeting schedule and a series of informational mailings were sent to all property owners informing them of the committee's work. A questionnaire sent to property owners and tenants solicited the neighborhood's support or opposition to the proposal as drafted. Of those responding, about 60% favored establishing a Lower Common Neighborhood Conservation District.

On November 28, 2006 the Study Committee voted 6-1 to approve its Final Report and transmit it to the Cambridge Historical Commission with a positive recommendation.* The Commission will hold a public hearing on the matter on February 1, and formulate a recommendation to the City Council.

The Study Committee's investigation determined the following:

- The distinctive street pattern of the neighborhood derives from the subdivision of the Lower Common in 1724 and its piecemeal residential development in the 19th century.
- The Lower Common contains a distinctive grouping of mid- to late-19th-century middle class houses, along with several important examples of 18th and 19th century houses that were moved from Massachusetts Avenue.
- Many houses in the Lower Common, set close to one another on short, densely-developed streets and ways, are architecturally modest and susceptible to alterations that can diminish their vernacular qualities and impinge on neighboring properties
- Apartment buildings constructed in the early decades of the 20th century present difficult conservation issues, despite the prevalence of uniform maintenance agreements in cases of condominium ownership.
- Reviews of alterations to a structure requiring a zoning variance usually do not address their impact on the architectural character of neighboring buildings and streetscape

The primary and secondary goals of the proposed order are intended to provide general guidance to the Lower Common Neighborhood Conservation District Commission in a wide variety of situations. If the measure is enacted, the Commission's primary goal will be to:

conserve the character, variety, and scale of the District's streetscapes and architecture, and to enhance the livability and vitality of the District for its residents and the public at large. The Lower Common Neighborhood Conservation District Commission will seek to conserve and enhance the unique functional environment and visual form of the District; preserve its architecturally and historically significant structures and their settings, and encourage design compatible therewith; mitigate potential adverse impacts of new development on adjacent properties and areas; and maintain the present diversity of development and open space patterns and building scales and dates. The District must remain a human-scale environment that complements nearby neighborhoods and maintains the history and traditions of its location.

Whenever possible, the Commission will attempt to:

- Preserve the historic development patterns of the neighborhood, including the distinctive street layout of interior, resident- and pedestrian-oriented streets that are bounded by the neighborhood's automobile-oriented cross streets.
- Conserve the character, variety and scale of the neighborhood's architecture, its amalgamation of building styles, and the functional alterations of its structures.
- Accommodate changes that support the District's conservation goals
- Provide administrative procedures to enhance predictability of outcomes and timeframes for property owners.
- Mitigate the impact of changes on adjacent properties, e.g., visually or audibly intrusive HVAC equipment.

In general, the scope of the Lower Common NCD Commission's authority would be binding on all reviews of construction, demolition or alteration that affect exterior architectural features visible from a public way, except when

* The "Final report of the Lower Common Neighborhood Conservation District Study with Guidelines for Development and Neighborhood Conservation" is posted on the website of the Cambridge Historical Commission at http://www.cambridgema.gov/Historic/lowercommon_study.html. Copies are available from the Cambridge Historical Commission, in person at 831 Massachusetts Avenue or by calling (617) 349-4684.

the Executive Director of the Cambridge Historical Commission is authorized to issue Certificates of Nonapplicability or when the alteration is exempt from review. However, publicly visible exterior alterations of four houses of extraordinary historical importance, 35 Bowdoin Street, 26 Gray Street, 46 Hudson Place, and 1 Potter Park, will be subject to binding review.

Subject to the detailed provisions of the Order establishing the District, Certificates of Nonapplicability (i.e., permission to proceed) will be issued for:

- Walls and fences in a front yard that are four feet high or less, and walls and fences elsewhere on the property that are six feet high or less as measured from the existing grade to the top of the wall or fence panel.
- Dormers that comply with the Board of Zoning Appeal's Design Guidelines and that substantially match the details of the existing structure.
- Wood-exterior replacement sash matching the existing sash in size, configuration, and proportion.
- Wood-exterior replacement doors matching the existing doors in size, configuration, and proportions, or the door of a nearby structure in the same style.
- Alterations to the front façade of a double house or row house that incorporate architectural details which substantially match the appearance of existing original features and do not diminish the symmetry or uniformity of appearance that characterizes the structure.
- Alterations to the rear of a structure that are visible only from a public street or way other than the street or way faced by its principal façade.
- Removal of siding and replacement by materials substantially matching the original, or, if the original siding is unknown, by siding customarily used on similar structures.
- Skylights or solar collectors in close contact with and parallel to the plane of the roof.
- Intake and exhaust vents of less than one square foot in area.
- Chimney caps installed in a manner that will allow their removal without altering the structure or appearance of the chimney.

The following categories of structures or exterior architectural features will be exempt from review:

- Exterior alterations that do not increase or diminish the number or size or alter the location of windows and doors, cause the removal of any bay, porch, hood, window or door casing or any other protruding decorative element, or alter the appearance of a roof.
- Signs, temporary structures, lawn statuary, or recreational equipment, subject to conditions as the Commission may reasonably specify.
- Terraces, walks, driveways, sidewalks and similar structures substantially at existing grade level. *curb cuts*
- Storm doors and windows, screens, window air conditioners, lighting fixtures, antennae, trelliswork and similar appurtenances.
- Exterior paint color and ordinary maintenance.

Finally, the proposed Order contains a sunset clause that provides that the Cambridge Historical Commission will review the Lower Common NCD Commission's effectiveness during its fourth year in operation and report its recommendations to the City Council. In the event that the City Council repeals or fails to re-adopt the Lower Common NCD Order, the Lower Common Neighborhood Conservation District Commission will cease to be in effect.



The Lower Common NCD study area is enclosed by the dotted line. The Old Cambridge Historic District abuts the proposed district on the south, and the Avon Hill Neighborhood Conservation District on the north.

Cambridge Historical Commission
January 16, 2007

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Exempt