

Neighborhood Conservation Districts in Cambridge

Protecting Neighborhood Character

In 1983, the Cambridge City Council adopted legislation designed to preserve and protect areas and buildings significant in Cambridge's history. Article III of Chapter 2.78 of the Cambridge City Code allows for the "establishment of neighborhood conservation districts and protected landmarks."

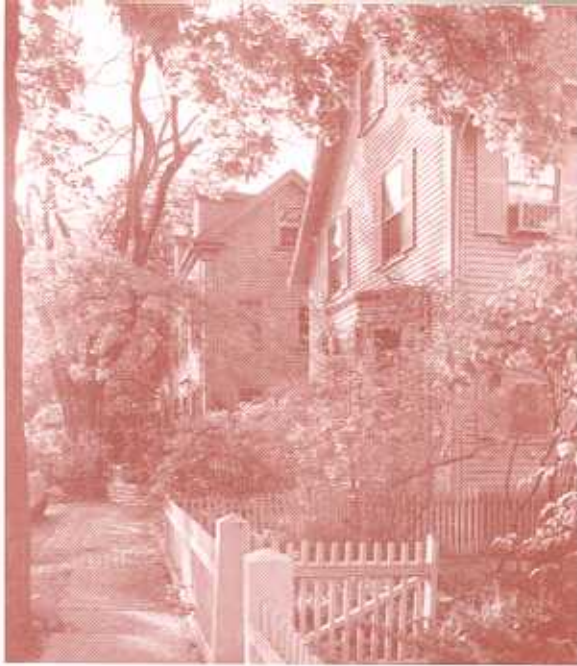
Neighborhood conservation districts, or NCDs, are groups of buildings and their settings that are architecturally and historically distinctive; landmarks are individual buildings and structures whose design or history makes them worthy of preservation. Neighborhood conservation district designation recognizes the particular design qualities of distinctive neighborhoods and encourages their protection and maintenance for the benefit of the entire city.

Establishing Neighborhood Conservation Districts

According to Article III, the purpose of establishing a neighborhood conservation district is

to conserve and protect the beauty and heritage of the City of Cambridge and to improve the quality of its environment through . . . conservation and maintenance of neighborhoods . . . which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the City; to resist and restrain environmental influences adverse to this purpose; to foster appropriate use and

**Neighborhood
Conservation
Districts**



wider public knowledge and appreciation of such neighborhoods . . . and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare by making the City a more attractive and desirable place in which to live and work.

The district designation process is initiated when ten registered voters petition the Commission to study a neighborhood for that purpose. The Commission itself may begin the study of a district, but, in general, neighborhood conservation districts develop out of residents' concern over issues that threaten their neighborhood's character. If the Commission finds the proposed area eligible for study and votes to accept the petition, a year-long period of study commences during which the proposed district is protected as if it were already designated. This "interim protection" period requires that the Commission review and approve any proposed alterations to properties in the study area before a building permit is issued.

During the interim protection period, a study committee is appointed by the City Manager to report on the merits of the proposed district and to recommend the boundaries and type of regulatory authority needed to protect it. A staff member from the Historical Commission assists the committee. The study involves canvassing neighbors

and holding meetings to arrive at a consensus on the district's regulation. The study committee's findings are presented in a study report. No later than 45 days after the report's transmittal to the Commission, those findings are reviewed at a public hearing.

If the Commission finds that the study area meets the criteria for designation, the report is forwarded to the City Council with a favorable recommendation to designate. Designations are made by a majority vote of the City Council.



Neighborhood Conservation District Controls

Article III generally states that "all construction, demolition or alteration that affects exterior architectural features, other than color," shall be reviewed in a neighborhood conservation district. However, the ordinance provides seven possible exemptions from review that can be adopted in a particular district. Districts may adopt both binding and non-binding categories of review, allowing regulations to be closely tailored to the needs of a neighborhood. The City Council order establishing the district incorporates specific review standards to govern that district. Cambridge's neighborhood conservation districts each incorporate different review standards; consult the web site or the individual Fact Sheets for each NCD's review standards.

When a district is established, a separate NCD commission may be appointed by the City

Manager or the district may be administered by the Historical Commission itself. Neighborhood conservation district commissions consist of five members and three alternates and include a mix of district residents and professionals in real estate, architecture, or historic preservation. A member of the Historical Commission serves on each NCD commission. The NCD commission (or the Historical Commission, if it is administering the district) is empowered to approve, before work begins, any new construction, demolition, or alteration that will be visible from any public way or place. No such work can be undertaken, nor can a building permit be obtained, until the commission has issued a Certificate of Appropriateness, Non-Applicability, or Hardship.

Questions and Answers for Property Owners

What is a Certificate of Appropriateness?

A Certificate of Appropriateness is a document issued by the NCD Commission or Historical Commission permitting alterations to the publicly-visible exterior architectural features (other than color) of properties in the NCD. It certifies that the alterations are not "incongruous to the historic aspects, architectural significance or the distinctive character of the . . . neighborhood conservation district."

The certificate incorporates plans and specifications submitted as evidence of the proposed work and forms the basis of the commission's agreement with the applicant on how changes can be made to the property. Certificates are valid for six months from the date of issue. They can be extended once for a further six months each, on the written approval of the Commission chair.

Do I need a certificate for interior work?

A certificate must be obtained from the Historical or NCD Commission before the Inspectional Services Department will issue a building permit. A Certificate of Non-Applicability will be issued for changes that affect interiors, color, exterior architectural features not visible from a public way, or other areas not under the commission's jurisdiction. This signifies that the commission's

jurisdiction does not apply to the kind of work proposed.

If the work proposed in the application clearly lies in an area not regulated by the commission, Certificates of Non-Applicability can be issued by the Commission staff on receipt of an application and without a public hearing.

Are there other kinds of certificates?

Yes. A commission may issue a Certificate of Hardship for work that is otherwise inappropriate if it determines, at a public hearing, that failure to approve an application would entail a substantial hardship, financial or otherwise, and that the work would not be a significant detriment to the neighborhood conservation district.

Regardless of the type of certificate needed, no property in a neighborhood conservation district may undergo construction, alteration, or demolition unless the NCD commission, the Historical Commission, or the Commission staff has first issued a certificate for the work proposed. Once the proper certificate has been issued, a building permit can be obtained and the work can proceed.

How do I apply for a certificate?

Applications for certificates are available on the web site and 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. Deadlines for submitting applications may be obtained on the web site or by calling the Historical Commission office.

How does the commission conduct its review?

Applications for all changes within the commission's jurisdiction are brought to a public hearing, which provides an open forum for discussion. Abutters to the property, the City Clerk, and any others deemed to be affected are notified of the hearing. In addition, the commission is required to advertise its hearings in a newspaper of general circulation fourteen days in advance.

Are there standards for the commission's review?

Article III directs commissions conducting reviews to consider "the historic and architectural value and significance of the site or structure, the general design, arrangement, texture and material of the features involved, and the relation of such features to similar features of structures in the surrounding area." The commission can set stricter standards for development than those allowed by zoning. However, color, interiors, and aspects of the property not visible from a public way cannot be regulated by the commission.

The commission also relies on standards contained in the NCD order. These may be based on broader standards, such as the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation, but each neighborhood conservation district order incorporates specific criteria tailored to the district. For further information, consult the order for each NCD. Additional information is also available on the web site, in Fact Sheets for the Avon Hill, Half Crown, Marsh and Mid Cambridge NCDs, in the Practical Guide to the Harvard Square Conservation District, and in application forms for each district.

Does being in a neighborhood conservation district mean that I can never change the appearance of my property?

No. Properties in neighborhood conservation districts are not frozen in time. District protection is designed to ensure that a neighborhood's distinctive qualities are considered when changes occur. Many routine and minor changes are reviewed administratively by the Historical Commission staff. Other changes may be reviewed by an NCD commission in an advisory, non-binding capacity. Binding reviews may be reserved for major changes, such as demolition, new construction, and major exterior alteration, or for especially significant buildings, such as those on the National Register of Historic Places.

Neighborhood conservation district commissions work with applicants to develop design solutions that respect both the neighborhood's significant qualities and the needs of the property owner. The Historical Commission staff is also available to discuss proposed alterations informally.

Sarah Colburn House, 7 Dana Street, 1841. Photo, 1964. (Jack Boucher, Historic American Buildings Survey)

Ash Street Place. Photo, 1973. (Richard Cheek, Cambridge Historical Commission)

Quincy Street from Broadway. Photo, ca. 1865. (Cambridge Historical Society)

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