

TIPS ON RUNNING A SUCCESSFUL HISTORIC PRESERVATION PROGRAM

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS passed a number of laws requiring the protection of historic resources on federal land beginning with the Antiquities Act in 1906 and the Historic Sites Act in 1935. The National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA), adopted in 1966, was the first federal law that provided protection for historic resources on private property.

The Certified Local Government (CLG) program was established in 1980. The NHPA was amended to encourage the direct participation of local governments in the identification, evaluation, registration, and preservation of historic properties within their jurisdictions and promote the integration of local preservation into local planning and decision making. Requirements for participating in the CLG program include establishing an ordinance to protect historic resources. While listing on the National Register of Historic Places did not directly result in regulation, local communities that became CLGs were required to establish regulations to protect the National Register resources within their jurisdictions.

Common Objections to Local Preservation Programs

While the NHPA has spurred the listing of almost 900,000 resources comprising 1.8 million buildings, sites, and objects across the country, significant opposition to preservation has arisen in the past 50 years. Opponents argue that designation and local preservation regulations are too harsh, causing economic hardship to historic property owners. Property owners often have no understanding of the purpose behind these design regulations. Social justice advocates argue that historic preservation can cause gentrification and displacement of already marginalized populations. Architects argue that their creativity is stifled due to overly strict design review. Developers argue that economic development and job creation are hampered by historic regulation. Even among preservationists, leaders from the National Trust for Historic Preservation argue that local historic preservation boards who use aesthetics and design review as their only basis for their historic preservation programs are

doing harm to our collective preservation movement.

Key Components of a Successful Preservation Program

What can be done to address these concerns? There are three key components to the development and maintenance of a successful historic preservation program. First, the program should reflect the vision of policy makers and provide a tangible benefit to the community. Second, the program must provide ongoing, meaningful public participation. Third, it should have an adopted historic preservation plan, with measurable goals to ensure that the program is achieving its desired outcome.

Public Need: Provide a Clear Public Benefit

What is the benefit of the preservation program to the community? What should be preserved? What places matter to the community and why? The value of these places and their history is best articulated in a community's comprehensive plan. Place can be

PUBLIC BENEFIT

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PARTICIPATION

Ensure that all citizens feel ownership and a greater connection to their sense of history and place within their own community.



sacred and provide a strong and often emotional connection to our history and ancestors. To ensure that these places are protected, it is important that a program capture this connection in the form of a stated purpose or vision and that the benefit to the public is clear.

For example, the benefit of preservation to the American people is articulated in the NHPA in these words: “the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people.”

Many states have adopted preservation plans that local communities can look to for guidance as well. Colorado’s 2020 Statewide Preservation Plan, *The Power of Heritage and Place*, has a multifaceted vision that includes this statement: “More Coloradans will self-identify as preservationists through the effort to communicate how preservation relates to each individual.” Creation of a vision statement that clearly defines how historic preservation benefits your community is a critical component of a successful preservation program.

Public Participation: Allow for Meaningful Participation

Most historic preservation programs allow for a basic level of public participation, typically involving a public hearing in front of a historic design review board. What is this

interaction like for an average citizen? If this is the only opportunity the community has to interact with the program, there is no meaningful way for them to understand the potential benefits of historic preservation, or the purpose behind the program. This sets the stage for an adversarial relationship with historic property owners.

This adversarial stage often is set well before any historic design review. Traditionally, preservation has begun with an architectural survey by a historic preservation professional. The results of this survey are used to determine whether a neighborhood or individual resource has enough integrity and significance to be worthy of designation and protection. This process requires no significant community involvement. The NHPA includes a requirement for owner consent for designation of individual properties, but only requires that a majority of owners consent to a district. This means that it is feasible that a large number of owners could be designated as part of a historic district who do not wish to be.

How can this adversarial climate change? Meaningful public participation requires reaching out to those who are impacted by the program, to ensure that they have a real opportunity to provide feedback about what should be preserved and how. To ensure broad and diverse community input about how a

community’s resources should be preserved and interpreted, there must be a clear and transparent process to ensure that this input is acknowledged and given real weight, well before any designation or historic design review occurs.

To assess the health of a community’s public participation, first identify where participation is currently occurring, and assess whether or not it is appropriate and meaningful. Are community members using historic designation on their own as a tool to stop growth and redevelopment in their neighborhoods? If so, there is no need to prepare for battle, but it is a red flag, indicating that policy makers need to engage in true comprehensive neighborhood planning to address competing goals within these neighborhoods. A comprehensive plan should be a road map for policy makers and the community, defining priorities and direction for creating a healthy, vibrant community that allows for both growth and connection to the past.

This participation assessment should include an evaluation of whose stories are told and how citizens are engaged. There may be marginalized groups that have not had an opportunity to celebrate their histories, perhaps because their buildings were initially overlooked or are already gone. But technology available today opens up exciting new opportunities. It allows new and innovative ways of receiving input from citizens about significance

of place. A survey does not need to be completed by a preservation professional with a focus on just architectural significance of extant buildings. Field survey can be an opportunity in and of itself for meaningful public participation. It is possible to collect experiential data about people's experience of place. This information can then be used for education and interpretation of historic places in non-traditional ways. This democratic approach can ensure that all citizens feel ownership and a greater connection to their sense of history and place within their own community.

One of the most critical components of a successful program is trust. When you have established a process for meaningful public participation that is in alignment with the goals of the community, your program can be seen as truly responsive and a reflection of your community's goals and vision. Your program will then be on its way to becoming a trusted resource within your community, instead of just a stage for contentious and adversarial design review and regulation.

Development of a Historic Preservation Plan

Once the community has clarified its vision and identified what places matter using meaningful public participation, it is important to reach a consensus regarding how these places should be protected and preserved. This is ideally achieved through a

community-based planning process that implements the comprehensive plan through a historic preservation plan and ordinance. The historic preservation plan should include direction for development or revision of a community's preservation ordinance, including design review standards, and demolition and adaptive reuse criteria. Interpretation is also an important component. Most people are not preservation professionals, and significant places cannot just be left to "speak for themselves." Their significance requires interpretation and storytelling. If a program can offer meaningful interpretation of its historic places for residents and visitors, it is on its way to achieving its vision and benefiting the community.

Development of a historic preservation plan also can help a community address preservation challenges and concerns through meaningful public participation. This planning process should include stakeholders who care about or are impacted by the program. It is critical to complete a needs assessment as part of the plan to find out what the stakeholders need, and what issues and concerns they have. Once needs have been identified, methods can be adopted to address them through goals in the plan.

When working on goals, always keep in mind the stated purpose or vision of the preservation program to ensure that the goals and programs are achieving the outcome desired. A plan

should also include a method of measuring or assessing success. If a program is not achieving its desired outcome, adjusting the goals within the plan may be required.

The historic preservation plan is a wonderful tool that can allow specific goals that address needs identified by stakeholders. The plan is also a good tool for public officials, who can refer to this resource to better understand the value of historic preservation in their communities. Once adopted, this plan can be used as the basis for an annual work plan for the preservation program, and it will help in the pursuit of grants and funding for specific projects to implement and achieve stated goals.

Conclusion

It is important to remember that regardless of federal legislation and national trends, historic preservation operates at a local level, one community at a time. Building a successful preservation program today can happen through an effective combination of community participation and implementation of a historic preservation plan that has a clear vision and public benefit. A preservation program can be powerful and empowering, creating meaningful connections with its history and sharing a sense of place with residents and visitors alike.

PRESERVATION PLAN

Allow specific goals to address needs identified by stakeholders.

