



## NEW HAMPSHIRE DIVISION OF HISTORICAL RESOURCES

State of New Hampshire, Department of Cultural Resources  
19 Pillsbury Street, P. O. Box 2043, Concord NH 03302-2043  
Voice / TTY RELAY ACCESS 1-800-735-2964  
<http://www.state.nh.us/nhdhr>

603-271-3483  
603-271-3558  
FAX 603-271-3433  
[preservation@nhdhr.state.nh.us](mailto:preservation@nhdhr.state.nh.us)

### KEY DESIGN REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSIONS

Among its responsibilities, a Historic District Commission is charged with evaluating the appropriateness of proposals for alterations and improvements to properties within the historic district. In making these decisions, the commission relies on its regulations and design guidelines to consider the effects the proposed actions would have on the property. All too often, however, commissioners jump right into critiquing the proposed design without properly framing the discussion. Before starting to evaluate a project against the commission's guidelines, it is important to establish a baseline of information that can help provide an objective, informed, and legally defensible decision. Answering these questions first, when beginning review of a proposal, will help to clarify how the official regulations and design guidelines apply.

1. WHY IS THE PROPERTY SIGNIFICANT?

Determining why a property is significant can influence the rigor with which the design guidelines are applied. To determine the significance of a property, many communities evaluate historical importance, architectural importance, and neighborhood character. What is the degree of significance? Is the property one of many similar ones in a district, or is it unique? *Consider to what extent the proposed work will affect one's ability to interpret the significance of the property. Actions that would impede one's ability to interpret the historic character of the property should be avoided.*

2. WHAT IS ITS PERIOD OF SIGNIFICANCE?

Every historic building or district has a period of significance – the time span during which it gained architectural, historical, or geographical importance. In most cases, a property is significant because it represents or is associated with a particular period in history. Frequently, this begins with its construction date and continues through the peak of early occupation. Building fabric and features that date from the period of significance typically contribute to the character of the building or district. It is important that the property continue to convey its period of significance and that features from this period be preserved. *Consider to what extent the proposed work will affect one's ability to interpret the period of significance of the property.*

3. WHAT ARE THE KEY FEATURES OF THE PROPERTY?

Every property has a set of character-defining features that help to convey its significance. These may include the basic form and materials of the building, the manner in which it sits on its site, as well as the details of windows, doors, trim and ornamentation. For some properties, simplicity of character is an underlying feature, while for others a high degree of ornamentation is a key feature. The location of these features should also be a consideration. For many structures, the character of windows and doors on the front façade are more important to defining character than those on the rear. *Consider how the key features of the property will be affected.*

## KEY DESIGN REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSIONS

### 4. WHAT IS ITS DEGREE OF INTEGRITY?

In addition to being historically significant, a property also must retain integrity – a sufficient percentage of the structure must date from the period of significance. The majority of the building's structural system and its materials should date from that time and its key character-defining features also should remain intact. These may include architectural details, such as dormers and porches, ornamental brackets and moldings and materials, as well as the overall mass and form of the building. It is these elements that allow a building or district to be recognized as a product of its time. If a building retains a high degree of integrity, then the guidelines for treatment may be applied more rigorously, to assure that this high degree of integrity is maintained. Will the proposed alterations be undertaken in a manner that minimizes loss of integrity? Will the proposal set the stage for subsequent alterations that would undermine the integrity of the property? *Consider to what extent the proposed work will affect the integrity of the property, and whether the property will retain a sufficient degree of integrity to continue to be considered historically significant.*

### 5. WHAT IS THE CHARACTER OF THE CONTEXT?

For an individual building, the context of the proposed work may be limited to the building and its site. For a historic district, the context is frequently the relationship of properties in close proximity, such as along an entire block. To what degree does the proposed project relate to this context? How sensitive is the context to change? Does the proposed project help to reinforce the scale and character of the block? Or does it stand out from the others in a way that is disruptive and jarring? *Consider how the proposed work affects one's interpretation of the context.*

### 6. WHAT ARE THE GOALS FOR PRESERVATION?

Good preservation seeks to maintain historic resources in the best condition possible, with the highest degree of integrity. These goals often must be considered in a broader arena of community policies. Ideally, a preservation element of the community's master plan defines goals for preservation. In addition, specific goals for individual historic resources and districts may be established. *Consider how the proposed work helps to achieve the community's preservation goals.*

### 7. WHAT IS THE NATURE OF THE PROPOSED WORK?

Each preservation project is unique. A project may include a variety of treatment techniques, including the repair and replacement of features or maintenance of those already in good condition. Before evaluating a proposal, it is important to confirm that everyone understands the scope of work. Can the various parts of the proposal be grouped into categories that align with those of the regulations or design guidelines, such as repair and replacement? By doing so, it will be easier to frame the discussion about the appropriateness of the work. *Consider the scope of work and how it can be characterized.*

### 8. WHAT IS THE DEGREE OF INTERVENTION WITH THE HISTORIC PROPERTY THAT IS PROPOSED?

Treatment procedures of historic buildings and their features should follow a sequence of actions that minimizes intervention with the building fabric. This is the preferred sequence:

- a. If a feature is intact and in good condition, maintain it as such.
- b. If the feature is deteriorated or damaged, repair it to its original condition.

## KEY DESIGN REVIEW QUESTIONS FOR HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSIONS

- c. If it is not feasible to repair the feature, then replace it with one that is the same or similar in character (materials, detail, finish) to the original one. Replace only that portion which is beyond repair.
- d. If the feature is missing entirely, reconstruct it from appropriate evidence.
- e. If a new feature or addition is necessary, design it in such a way as to minimize the impact on original features.

*Consider how the proposed project follows a logical sequence of actions with respect to repair versus replacement of character-defining features.*

### 9. IS THE PROPOSED WORK ADEQUATELY DESCRIBED?

The information provided with a submittal should be clear and understandable. It should adequately describe the work such that those reviewing can clearly understand what is proposed and contractors can be given firm direction. It should be clear enough that, should a violation in the authorized work occur, compliance action can be substantiated. In addition to a formal request form for design review, the following supporting documentation are among the items that should be considered or provided:

- a. Photographs of the entire building, neighboring buildings, and close-ups of any architectural details involved in the proposed changes.
- b. Material samples of replacement and new construction materials.
- c. Manufacturer's specifications and details of product installation
- d. Existing and proposed floor plans and elevation drawings, which must be to scale.
- e. Site plan
- f. A written description of the project
- g. A model of the proposed development (particularly for new construction).
- h. Analysis of the neighborhood context.
- i. Landscaping plan.

*Consider whether the applicant has provided the commission with adequate information on which to base a decision, and don't hesitate to defer the case until adequate information has been provided.*

### 10. HOW DO THE DESIGN GUIDELINES APPLY?

With the information collected from the previous questions, one can then begin a focused evaluation of the proposed project, using the design guidelines. The degree that each of the guidelines relates to the proposed project and the rigor with which each should be applied can now be more clearly understood. This means that the commission may then engage in a reasoned discussion of the appropriateness of the proposed project with a common understanding of the key variables of significance, integrity and key features that will define the character of the property should the proposed work be undertaken.

*Before and during deliberations, always consider how the commission's regulations and design guidelines apply.*