



## Proposed Downtown Historic Designation

### *Frequently Asked Questions*

**Q. What is an historic district?**

A. An historic district is an area with geographically definable boundaries, possessing a significant concentration of properties united by past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development. A historic district may be designated either on the National Register or as an Oak Park district.

**Q. How is a local Landmark/Historic District designated? Who decides on whether to designate?**

A. When an application for a landmark or historic district has been submitted to the Historic Preservation Commission for review, the HPC has to follow the historic preservation ordinance, which requires Commission to determine if the landmark or historic district meets the criteria for designation. The HPC will take public comment, but their decision is mainly based on the criteria. Their recommendation is forwarded to the Village Board, which makes the final determination to designate a landmark or historic district. Board member may base their decisions on any information, not just the historic criteria. In other words, if the property qualifies for designation under the historic criteria, the Board could still say no to the designation for other reasons.

**Q. Why designate downtown Oak Park as historic?**

A. Preserving downtown Oak Park's historic character was one of the top objectives listed by the public in the Downtown Master Plan. It was also a significant recommendation of the Downtown Steering Committee and goal of the Village Board. Preserving the community's historic and architectural character makes Oak Park a unique attraction to both tourists and regional shoppers. For the past four decades, Oak Park citizens have worked to preserve and enhance the unique historical and architectural heritage of the community with architectural surveys, local museums, an Oak Park Historic Preservation Ordinance and creating three historic districts and landmarks. A sensitive balance between preservation and new development continues that tradition and will make downtown Oak Park more economically viable.

**Q. What are the historic designation options being considered for downtown Oak Park?**

A. The three options are local Landmarking of the *significant* structures, an Oak Park Historic District and a National Register Historic District. The options can also be combined.

**Q. What is the difference between a National Register Historic District and an Oak Park Historic District?**

A. The National Register is a federal designation and must meet national standards to be listed. In general, the National Register is an honorary listing only. An Oak Park District is locally designated by the Village Board and is subject to the local Preservation Ordinance.

- Q. **Is not designating any of the downtown as historic an option?**
- A. This is a potential option. However, the Village Board has directed the Historic Preservation Commission to review and recommend some level of historic designation downtown. Historic preservation also is a consideration in the Downtown Master Plan and a recommendation of the Downtown *Superblock Steering Committee*.
- Q. **Has the Historic Preservation Commission stated a preference for one of the three historic designation options for downtown Oak Park?**
- A. No. While the HPC has discussed the options, it has not yet settled on one option. The Village Board, while in support of some type of historic designation downtown, also did not voice a preference for an option, but directed the HPC to discuss all three options with the public and then present an option for review.
- Q. **What effect will historic designations have on downtown issues such as the Marion Street Mall, parking garages, new streets and streetscape improvements?**
- A. For a historic district, the HPC would focus most on the buildings. The Commission would likely have the ability to comment on new structures built on vacant lots or replacing non-contributing buildings, creation of parking lots and opening of streets, but such comments would be advisory only. The HPC has the ability to comment on special zoning variances and planned developments within 250 feet of Landmarks.
- Q. **Aren't older commercial buildings obsolete for modern retail?**
- A. In most cases no. A vibrant downtown typically has a mix of national chain stores with larger floor areas and smaller locally owned shops. Successful regional downtowns, such as LaGrange, Naperville and Hinsdale all follow this model. In Oak Park, *Borders* is located in a National Register listed building. Most older commercial buildings can be rehabilitated economically.
- Q. **How would a building's ranking in the HPC's *Downtown Architectural Survey* change if it were in a local historic district?**
- A. Buildings ranked in the Downtown Architectural Survey as "Significant" or "Structure of Merit" would contribute to a district. Buildings ranked as "No Merit" would not contribute to a district. The Survey is available at [www.oak-park.us](http://www.oak-park.us).
- Q. **What are "contributing" and "non-contributing" buildings?**
- A. In an historic district, most buildings contribute to the significance of the area without individually having the credentials of a Landmark. These buildings are referred to as *Contributing Resources*. They help to maintain the historic integrity of the neighborhood. Often, there also are buildings that do not contribute to the significance of the historic district. These *Non-Contributing Resources* usually are less than 50 years old or have been significantly altered in the recent past. An historic district may include properties that are individually designated as Historic Landmarks. An Historic Landmark would be a Contributing Resource within a district.
- Q. **Can a property "opt out" of being included in an Oak Park historic district?**
- A. Not if it lies within the proposed boundaries of the district. If it is a non-contributing building that lies along the boundary, then it may be excluded from the district boundaries.

- Q. How old does my property have to be to be considered historic?**  
A. National standards consider 50 years to be the cut-off for potential historic buildings. The Village of Oak Park follows those standards in its preservation ordinance. However, age alone does not make a building historic. Age is one of several factors considered, such as the building's physical integrity, architectural character and who designed or constructed it.
- Q. Is Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) review of building permits required?**  
A. If a property is a contributing resource within an Oak Park Historic District, any exterior alterations visible from the street must be reviewed by the HPC. Typically, such reviews are advisory only. In cases that involve substantial demolition, or any work on the exterior of Landmarks, a *Certificate of Appropriateness* is required.
- Q. What repairs can I do to my property that won't require me to go before the Historic Preservation Commission?**  
A. The HPC's staff person typically approves 75 percent of all building permits submitted within historic districts. This involves work not visible from the street, minor maintenance and repair, alterations that do not change the building's materials and work on a non-contributing building.
- Q. Do I need to go to the Commission every time I want to change an awning or a sign?**  
A. No. Such items are not regulated by the historic preservation ordinance because they are considered temporary and easily reversible changes.
- Q. What is a Certificate of Appropriateness?**  
A. A request for full or partial demolition of a property located in a historic district, any work on a Historic Landmark or properties being altered with Village funding must receive a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) from the Historic Preservation Commission prior to the Village issuing a permit for proposed work. As opposed to advisory review, historic property owners must comply with HPC recommendations under COA review prior to a building permit being issued. To facilitate the process, an applicant may request COA review prior to submitting a building permit application. The Commission's decisions are based on specific guidelines and an applicant may appeal an HPC decision to the Village Board.
- Q. How long will it take for my project to be reviewed?**  
A. For advisory reviews, there is a 30-day maximum review period, which takes place in parallel with building code review. Most remodeling proposals are approved within a day or two by the Commission staff person. If you are altering the exterior of a Landmark or proposing substantial demolition of a contributing building in a Historic District, a Certificate of Appropriateness is required. Such applications are typically reviewed first by a committee of architects on the Commission in order to provide comments and feedback on the proposal. Sometimes, the full HPC must also review the proposal and vote on the COA application. Both the Review Committee and HPC meet once a month. If the project meets the Review Guidelines, approval can take anywhere between 15 and 45 days. If the HPC determines the project does not meet the Guidelines, it is up to the applicant to make changes or request a public hearing. Because even partial demolition can be an irrevocable loss of an important village historic resource, the review process could take as much as three months. Applicants always have the option to appeal HPC decisions to a public hearing, an economic hardship hearing, to the Village Board and ultimately to the County Courts.

- Q. **Is work on “non-contributing” buildings reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission?**
- A. No. However, the HPC does have advisory review for new construction.
- Q. **If my building is included in an Oak Park historic district, do I have to restore my building to the way it originally looked?**
- A. No. However, the Historic Preservation Commission does encourages work in this direction.
- Q. **Is work on the interior of my building reviewed by the Historic Preservation Commission?**
- A. Not unless it is designated as a publicly accessible Interior Landmark.
- Q. **Are demolitions allowed in an Oak Park historic district?**
- A. Yes, but only non-contributing buildings may be entirely demolished. Partial demolition of contributing buildings may be approved if the areas are not visible from the street and do not remove any significant architectural features. If partial demolition is done to accommodate an addition, the addition must meet the Historic Preservation Commission’s review guidelines.
- Q. **Will Oak Park historic district designation hurt my property values?**
- A. There is no evidence that property values are negatively affected by historic district designation. In fact, numerous studies indicate that property values either stay the same or increase following designation. The property value is typically related more to whether improvements are done to the property or surrounding area.
- Q. **Are there any fees for the nomination of a historic district, a landmark or a Certificate of Appropriateness application?**
- A. No. Only standard building permit fees apply.
- Q. **Is owner consent required to landmark a property or designate a historic district?**
- A. No, but the Village Board can take owner objections into consideration. For National Register districts, 51 percent of the private property owners with the proposed district boundaries must object to prevent listing.
- Q. **How many properties must “contribute” to an historic district?**
- A. While there is no set rule, a standard rule of thumb is that 70 percent to 75 percent of properties must be considered contributing. The HPC tries to meet this standard.
- Q. **What are the boundaries of a historic district?**
- A. A district can be one block or many blocks, one street or many streets, depending on what historic resources remain and how they may or may not work together as a historic district. The boundaries of a historic district try to leave out those buildings that don’t contribute to its character, though only at the edges and not from the center.

- Q. **What are the incentives available to property owners for historic designation?**
- A. Economic incentives available for historic properties include the *Property Tax Assessment Freeze* program, available for single-family and residential condominium buildings; *Historic Rehab Tax Credit*, available for commercial, multi-family and office buildings; *Cook County Class L* incentive, available for commercial, multi-family and office buildings; and *preservation grants* from non-profit preservation agencies, available under certain circumstances. All Village commercial rehab grants and loans also may apply.
- Q. **If a commercial building is within a historic district, can it still qualify for the 10 percent Commercial Tax Credit?**
- A. No. The 10 percent tax credit is meant for commercial buildings constructed prior to 1953 that have no historic designation. Once a commercial building has been designated, either individually or within a historic district, it then only qualifies for the 20 percent Historic Tax Credit.

For more information, contact the Department of Community Planning and Development. Call 708.358.5417, e-mail [planning@oak-park.us](mailto:planning@oak-park.us) or visit [www.oak-park.us](http://www.oak-park.us).