

Frank Lloyd Wright-Prairie School of Architecture

Proposed Expansion of the Local Historic District Boundaries



Frequently Asked Questions

The Oak Park Historic Preservation Commission is considering an expansion of the **Frank Lloyd Wright-Prairie School of Architecture Historic District** to better identify and protect the buildings that give this district its special character. The boundaries of the National Register Historic District were expanded in 2009, but the local district boundaries were not. Expanding the local boundaries will allow the Village to manage the change occurring in the neighborhood to ensure as much of the original character as possible remains intact. Changes that occur to one property can impact the property next door, the block or the entire neighborhood. Local historic district designation provides the Village with the tools to protect its architectural character.

The following are some of the questions most frequently asked about the proposed expansion of the local historic district.

Q: How did the Village create the Frank Lloyd Wright Historic District?

A: The Historic District was first designated by the Village in 1972 with the current boundaries. Shortly thereafter the Landmarks Commission was created to implement the preservation ordinance (now called the Historic Preservation Commission). The Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1973, and its boundaries expanded in 2009. The boundaries of the Local Historic District are now different from and smaller than those of the National Register district. The Village is exploring the option of expanding the local historic district boundaries to match the National Register historic district boundaries.

Q: What is the National Register of Historic Places?

A: The National Register is the nation's official list of places recognized for their historical or architectural significance and considered worthy of preservation.

The National Register does not prevent property owners from making changes (including demolition) or require owners to make improvements to their property. Nor does it limit the use of a building.

Q: What is a Historic District?

A: A historic district is an area with definable boundaries that possesses a significant concentration of properties united by past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development. A district may include properties that may not be individually significant, but contribute to the overall architectural character of the historic district.

Q: What areas are proposed for inclusion within the expanded Historic District boundaries?

A: The proposed expanded Historic District comprises all or parts of 97 blocks (approximately 1,934 properties) and is bounded on the north by Division Street, on the west by Harlem Avenue, on the south by Ontario and Lake Streets and on the east by N. Ridgeland Avenue

Q: Why do we need both forms of district designation?

A: National Register designation brings recognition, but it offers no protection for properties. Inclusion in a local historic district helps ensure that surrounding properties will not be demolished and replaced with something that is much larger and out of scale with the rest of the block, or their exteriors are not radically modified in ways that destroy the neighborhood's traditional appearance. It helps the Village manage change and maintain those things that make the Wright district such an interesting, attractive, and desirable place to live and work.

Q: Are there any special requirements for properties in a Local District?

A: Yes. The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) understands the need for changes that will keep

a building functional for families and business owners, but we also want to protect and preserve the character of the building and the neighborhood in which it's located. Therefore, any significant alterations to the exterior of a building require a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) from the HPC. Significant alterations include work that requires a building permit, including additions and full or partial demolition. When considering changes to the exterior of the property, the owner is asked to follow the Village's Architectural Review Guidelines, (which are available for downloading at www.oak-park.us/public/pdfs/Preservation%20Guidelines.pdf) and work closely with the Planning staff and the Architectural Review Committee.

Q: So the Commission gets to tell me what I can and can't do with my building?

A: No. The Village will be assisting property owners and helping them achieve what they want with their buildings, while also fulfilling the community's long-standing commitment to historic preservation in ways that benefit ALL property owners in Oak Park. The HPC's role is less about regulating what a property owner can do, and more about helping that owner meet their needs and goals for the building within a preservation context. The COA review process allows the HPC, acting on the Village's behalf, to ensure that alterations are sensitive to the features and elements of the building that qualified it for historic designation in the first place. For instance, replacing the distinctive flat roof of a Prairie-style home with a tall gable would affect the overall design and scale of the house, making it into something very different than the architect intended. And if your project does not meet the Guidelines and is not approved, you always have the option of appealing the decision to the Village Board.

Q: You say the HPC is there to work with me on my project, but be honest...how difficult is it to get a project reviewed and approved?

A: Much, much easier than most people seem to think. A review of the 9,255 permits requested since 2001 shows that the vast majority (86%) were approved with a simple staff review. They never had to go before the Architectural Review Committee or the Historic Preservation Commission for a full review. Only 6% of all projects were required to do the full COA process. For those property owners

that are required to participate in a review process, the staff, commission architects, and preservation experts will work with those property owners to resolve any issues. This means the Village supplies unlimited professional consultation as a free service to property owners in the historic districts. Many property owners have said that their final project is improved as a result of those consultations and the review process.

Q: Who are the people on the Preservation Commission who get to make these decisions?

A: Commission members can be architects, historians, property developers, realtors, lawyers, and people whose professional and community backgrounds lend them to historic preservation. Most importantly, they are your neighbors and they care deeply about the future of the Village. Prior to their appointment on the HPC, they are screened and interviewed by Village staff, the Citizen Involvement Commission, and the Preservation Commission Chair to ensure that their background, skills, and interests are compatible with the larger goals of the HPC.

Q: Are there any financial benefits of being in a Local Historic District?

A: Absolutely. Properties that are Contributing Resources in the historic district and are proposing rehab are eligible for tax incentives for rehabilitation.

- The Illinois Property Tax Assessment Freeze can freeze the property taxes of single-family residential properties for up to 12 years at their pre-rehab assessed value, which can result in a significant savings in property taxes. In fact, numerous residential properties in the district have already made use of this incentive. Information on the Tax Assessment Freeze can be found at www.illinoishistory.gov/PS/taxfreeze.htm.
- Multi-family and commercial properties can use the 20% Federal Rehab Tax Credit, which supplies a credit on your taxes equivalent to 20% of the qualified rehab expenses. For example, if you spend \$150,000 on an interior or exterior rehab, you could be eligible for a \$30,000 credit on your federal income taxes. The credit does not need to be taken in a single year and can be spread over several years of tax liability. Information on the Federal Rehab Tax Credits and how to use them

can be found at <http://ntcicfunds.com/tax-credit-basics/federal-tax-credit-basics/>

- Multi-family and commercial properties can take advantage of the Cook County Class L designation which reduces your property taxes following a significant rehabilitation. Properties with the Class L designation will be assessed at 10% of the fair market value for the first 10 years, 15% for year 11 and 20% for year 12.

- All properties that are Contributing Resources are eligible for a façade easement donation through Landmarks Illinois, where you receive a one-time charitable donation on your federal income taxes by donating the value of an exterior or interior easement. More information on easements can be found at www.landmarks.org/easement_overview.htm.

Q: Speaking of taxes, will landmark designation affect my property taxes?

A: Numerous studies have been conducted in communities around the country on whether historic district designation has an impact (negative or positive) on property values. These studies consistently show that historic designation not only increases property values, but also helps neighborhoods hold their property values better over time, even during the recent economic downturn. In addition, Historic Preservation Commission reviews and oversight increase property values even

more by preserving the features and character that make these neighborhoods so desirable. Although economic and development pressures, shifting population trends, proportion of rental-to owner-occupied properties, crime, general appearance and overall perception all affect property values, most local historic districts have experienced improvement in the appearance of the area and an increase in home-ownership.

Q: What is the process for expanding the local historic district boundaries?

A: The Historic Preservation Commission will host public meetings for the residents of the district to learn more about the designation and the process. Any expansion of the local district would require a public hearing before the Historic Preservation Commission and approval by the Village Board. The public and property owners in the proposed expansion area would have an opportunity to comment at the public hearings.

Q: What if I have other questions that aren't addressed by these FAQs?

A: You are encouraged to attend the public meetings on the proposed district expansion. The first meeting is scheduled for March 21, 2011 at 7:00 pm in the Oak Park Public Library. You also can contact Douglas Kaarre, Commission staff at kaarre@oak-park.us or 708.358.5417 with questions or requests for additional information.

