

HISTORIC DISTRICTS COMMISSION

NOVEMBER, 2010

Brief Job Description

“The Historic Districts Commission is the Town’s permitting board responsible for determining the appropriateness of work proposed on properties located in an historic district.” Our responsibilities fall under state law and under the by-laws of the Town. The HDC is a design review board whose members review and study proposals for new construction or alterations of existing structures within designated Historic Districts. The Commission works with the applicant to preserve the unique characteristics of homes and buildings in the districts; to maintain and improve the settings for those structures; to encourage and work with owners to make new construction compatible with the surrounding architecture; and to promote community awareness of Hingham’s architectural and historic heritage. The HDC is comprised of 10 members, five voting members and five alternate members.

Accountability

As a commission, we operate under the Administrator for the Historic Districts Commission as well as the Administration of Land Use. We are accountable to the Town of Hingham and its residents.

Contributions to Successful Functioning of Historic Districts Commission

The success of a Commission depends upon the commitment and expertise of its members. Our current commission is strong, composed of a well-balanced mix of dedicated commissioners who attend meetings consistently and share knowledge with one another and the applicants coming before the commission. Commissioners also are responsible for attending Saturday morning site visits in order to observe proposed alterations by applicants.

Our paid Administrator is responsible for all of the permitting processes (which may include telephone consultations with applicants), for formulating and posting the monthly agenda, and providing applicants with permits after the board has voted to issue a Certificate of Appropriateness. The Administrator provides monthly minutes, schedules site visits and appointments for all hearings as well. The Administrator and her paid, part time assistant work with the Building Department when proposed structural work is within an Historic District.

How to Bring About More Effective Functioning

The Commissioners are currently updating the Historic Districts Commission Handbook with each commissioner taking responsibility for one section of the book. Our goal is to add more detail which may result in fewer questions by applicants. We are studying the by-laws of different towns with historic districts and we have found this exercise to be of great assistance in our work.

We are discussing the ideas of application fees and possible fines for noncompliance. Although these ideas have not been adopted by previous commissioners, we are considering the appropriateness of doing so.

Anticipated Challenges and Changes

Property owner interest in preserving the Town's historic and architectural resources has diminished. Although residents like the "historic character" of Hingham, many do not want to participate in maintaining it. In order to continue to preserve and protect the Town's resources, the Historical Commission and the Historic Districts Commission plan to propose additional districts or extend existing districts.

The challenge of losing any staff hours from the Administrator's position would put the commission in a hardship position as our work continues to grow and will increase as new properties are added to the Town's inventory of historic assets. We are all aware of the current financial crisis and appreciate the work of the Government Study Committee. Should you have further questions please do not hesitate to call or email me. Thank you.

Sincerely

Suky Berry, (sukyberry@gmail.com)
Chairman, Historic District Commission.