

Historic District Survey Suggestions - June 6, 2019
Mary Elwart-Keys
502 W. Main Street

The original Northville Historic District Study Committee wrote to the City Council, circa 1972, and said that “an historic preservation program was needed to encourage homeowners to preserve the old and mellow flavor of this city”. In the original Northville Historic District proposal “Purpose” section of the HDC’s establishing documentation, the last paragraph states:

“The buildings we are trying to protect in the proposed historic district are largely of the Victorian period, not great architecturally but ‘carpenter Gothic’ typical of that time...”
In “Appendix A. PURPOSE” , a stated goal was to stabilize and improve property values.

I have grave concerns about the Historic District. That our local district mirrors, and in some cases— exceeds —the Department of Interior Standards is a problem. The Department of Interior Standards are difficult to interpret and apply by the HDC and architects, confusing to homeowners, and indecipherable to new homeowners and realtors. But we do not need to make things so difficult.

It is possible to have a local historic district and have standards and guidelines that do not mirror the National Registry. While SHPO recommends this, they will tell you that it is not required. We can have a local district even without BEING on the National Register. And here’s why that might make more sense:

—The guidelines would be specific to our town. We could embrace one of the founding tenets of our district — “stabilize and improve property values”. Houses with obviously new additions are not attractive and do not increase a property’s value. Under the current status, we have architects and homeowners trying to turn a house into a disparate-looking and somewhat livable update to avoid the dreaded “creating a false sense of history”. Instead, we could allow additions & renovations that create a seamless transition from the old to the new — maintaining an attractive exterior that does preserve the essence of “carpenter Gothic” style, yet does provide modern comforts (such as rooms you can stand up), that actually would “stabilize and improve property values”. But how would we do this in a way that would preserve our local architecture?

—We could create and provide a time-honored architectural aid called a “Pattern Book”. It would provide guidelines embracing local context. The National Park Service states that a pattern book provides builders and craftsman with plans and elevation drawings that they can adapt for their own needs. Architectural elements could be catalogued street by street in our historic district, to ensure new construction and renovations would not introduce jarring deviations from existing structures and would relate to what’s in the neighborhood.

- We can have more than one historic district in Northville. The Commercial District, which is fairly landlocked, can be it’s own district. The current residential HD, could be another. Other neighborhoods with interesting architectural styles can be yet another.
- My last and major concern about the HD is this: Gentrification. Today, the requirements for authentic restoration of historic homes is outrageously costly. Multiple pricey iterations from one’s architects, 3-D renderings, multiple trips to the HDC and the priciest of solutions seem to be required to hit the proper balance lately. Only the wealthiest of homeowners will be able to live here. As a retired woman on a budget, I am concerned that I will not be able to

age in place because I will not be able to maintain my home in the manner that seems to now be required, rather than “encouraged” by “guidelines” that in all reality are rules.

So here is my proposal: That we table the approval, acceptance and codification of this survey update and discuss a more realistic, easy to understand approach to our local historic district. Let's make our own and create our own future based on a rich and vibrant past.