

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS: URBAN LEGENDS AND THE REALITIES OF PRESERVATION IN LITTLETON

The City of Littleton maintains a historic preservation program as a part of its community planning and development strategies. Properties that are at least 40 years old may be evaluated for potential historic significance and, if they meet the criteria specified, may be considered for listing by the city as a historic landmark.

Questions often arise regarding local preservation programs related to how a property is found to have significance, and what the effects will be of listing a landmark. This paper answers some basic questions that typically arise.

### **PART 1: IS MY PROPERTY HISTORIC?**

#### **Designating Properties as Littleton Landmarks**

The City Council may designate a property as a Historic Landmark, either as an individual structure or as a contributor in a district. This is a formal process that is described in the city code.

#### **How is a building determined to be historically significant?**

A property must have historic significance to be considered a contributing property. A professional, trained in the survey of historic structures, evaluates the property. They consider the building's character, quality in design and construction, its role in the history of the community and its association with people significant to the community and its history.

The building also must retain enough of its original fabric to be able to convey the reasons for its significance. If an initial evaluation finds that the building is in fact significant, then it may be considered for recognition in a variety of ways: The building may be recognized locally as a "property of merit" or as a "historic landmark" at the local level, and as a historic resource at the state or national level.

#### **What is the Period of Significance?**

Most preservation programs use a "period of significance" to describe properties. It is the span of time during which important events in a property's history occurred. It often begins with the construction of the building and continues for several years, even decades. Features of the property that date from this period of significance are those that typically should be preserved. Alterations that occurred to the property outside the period of significance may not merit preservation.

*Note: At present, Littleton's preservation program does not address Period of Significance, but adopting this tool could help property owners better understand appropriate approaches for improvements to historic resources.*

#### **If my building is 40 years old, is it automatically historic?**

No. The age criterion is only the first consideration in determining historic significance. It simply serves as a preliminary "filter" to provide some distance in time before historic significance can be evaluated.

#### **Is an owner's consent required to designate a historic property?**

Not in most communities. The decision to recognize and designate a building as historic or contributing is most typically made by preservation commissions and confirmed by a city council. In general, even where communities retain the power to designate without owner consent, they still seek owner support. Most cities feel it is important to be able to designate over an owner's objection for unexpected or urgent situations. Littleton is among those communities that have the potential to designate a landmark without the owner's consent, although in practice it has not done so.

## CITY OF LITTLETON PRESERVATION PROGRAM

### **What does a List of Merit do?**

A List of Merit recognizes historic structures that are worthy of preservation, but stops short of requiring approval of any alterations, which is normally required of landmarked properties. Often these structures are eligible for local, state or national designation. Some incentives may be available to these properties.

*Note: At present, the City of Littleton does not offer any special incentives for properties on a List of Merit, but they could be incorporated in an update of the ordinance.*

## **PART 2: THE EFFECTS OF LANDMARKING A PROPERTY**

### **Restrictions on Landmark Properties**

There are some limitations placed on a property that has been listed as a landmark. Here are some typical concerns:

#### **If the city lists my property as a historic landmark must I restore it?**

No. Listing a property as a landmark does not trigger restoration. When an owner does wish to make improvements, then the proposed work is reviewed for appropriateness. Otherwise, it may continue to be maintained in its current character, even with non-historic alterations.

#### **If a property is landmarked, must it be returned to its original use?**

No. Historic structures continue to be adapted to new, compatible uses. The city's land use regulations set the range of uses that may be permitted. In fact, in some communities, greater flexibility in land use is offered as an incentive for preservation of historic buildings.

#### **If I apply for a permit to rehabilitate my front porch only, will I be required to repair the rest of the building?**

No. Design review is a reactive process, responding only to the work proposed by an owner. If alterations to a historic property are proposed, only the work submitted will be reviewed.

### **Can I make changes to a landmarked property?**

Yes. Many historic buildings undergo changes over time, to accommodate new needs. A new wing may be added to a house, for example. The key is that the key features of a property be preserved when such alterations occur. For this reason, additions usually should be located in an area where there are few character-defining features, such as to the rear, and that they appear subordinate to the original structure.

### **Are there restrictions on the interior of a landmarked property?**

No. Littleton's preservation ordinance does not provide for regulation of the interior of a historic building.

## **The Costs of Preservation**

### **Are building codes more restrictive for historic properties?**

No. In fact, there is some additional flexibility that is available through the International Existing Building Code. There are even additional provisions that the city can adopt for historic buildings specifically.

### **Is the cost of insurance higher for historic properties?**

Not normally. Insurance rates reflect the level of coverage that an owner chooses. It is possible to insure a historic property for roughly the same cost as a newer property, depending on the level of coverage desired. Basic coverage will provide for a replacement structure of comparable size, but not historic character. Insurance costs are higher when more coverage is desired to cover replacement or repair of historic features.

These policies typically provide for "in-kind" replacement of loss or damaged features, but not their reconstruction. It is very possible that the additional cost for insuring a historic property can be very minimal; however, in some cases it can also be quite high, based on the level of coverage selected. The higher insurance costs have more to do with a property's value. In many places having a property located within a historic district can increase the value of all properties in the area, which may also lead to higher insurance costs.

Some actions can be taken to reduce the cost of insurance on any existing building. For example, installing a fire sprinkler system can significantly reduce premiums.

### **Being in a Historic District**

Historic districts are areas identified as having a collection of properties with historic significance and in which a sense of time and place is conveyed. Some frequent questions:

#### **Must all buildings within a historic district have historic significance?**

No. The majority of buildings within a district should have historic significance in order to convey a sense of time and place, but not all are required to. Many districts contain a combination of historic and non-historic properties, generally classified as those “contributing” to the historic character of the district and those that are “non-contributing”.

*Note that Littleton’s preservation program does not at present address non-contributing properties, but language clarifying how non-contributing properties are to be treated could be incorporated in custom-tailored design guidelines.*

#### **If my building is badly damaged, due to a disaster, must I re-construct it to the original look?**

No. If a landmark building is damaged extensively, the Historic Preservation Committee will evaluate the degree to which it may have lost its integrity. If it has reached a point where it has lost its significance, then the building will be considered a “non-contributor.” In that case, an owner may consider repair, using guidelines for “New Construction,” or demolition of the structure.

## **PART 3: LEARNING WHAT IS APPROPRIATE**

### **Design Guidelines**

Design guidelines offer direction for property owners when they are considering making improvements to their properties. They also may be used in some formal development review processes required by the city. Effective guidelines are well illustrated and provide help-

ful information for compatible design. Some frequent questions:

#### **Does Littleton have design guidelines for historic preservation?**

The city does not have formally adopted guidelines for historic preservation. Its Historic Preservation Code does include a list of criteria that are used by the Historic Preservation Board to issue a Certificate of Historic Appropriateness.

#### **Do Littleton’s Downtown Design Guidelines address historic properties?**

Littleton has guidelines for design in the general downtown area but the downtown historic district itself is not identified in them. The downtown guidelines apply to new construction and alterations to existing buildings but they do not specifically address historic structures.

#### **Can design guidelines be flexible?**

Design guidelines may limit some construction options, but good ones do offer flexibility within a range of approaches that is appropriate. Flexible guidelines focus on maintaining the historic appearance of a property and its “integrity” in terms of the amount of original material that is kept, but do permit the use of alternative materials as well as alterations and additions. They should include examples of alternative ways to repair and replace building features.

*For more information on how design guidelines work, please see the working paper: “Strategies for Design Guidelines.”*

#### **How are design guidelines applied to non-historic buildings?**

Some buildings that lie within a historic district do not have historic significance, and are considered “non-contributing.” Whereas the goal for contributing properties is preservation, the goal for non-contributing properties is to be compatible with the character of the district, but not to pretend to be historic. Design guidelines for compatible new construction typically apply to these buildings. These are published as a separate chapter in a set of guidelines for the historic district. They focus on compatibility of basic mass, form and site design, but not on copying historic architectural details or styles.

## **PART 4: INCENTIVES FOR PRESERVATION**

Most preservation programs offer some special benefits to owners of landmark structures. These include financial aids, design assistance, and flexibility in some zoning regulations. Here are some related questions:

### **What incentives have been recommended for consideration?**

In previous workshops it was suggested that additional incentives for historic preservation be considered. Existing incentives include reduced parking requirements, fee waivers and preservation grants.

Suggestions made for additional incentives to consider include:

- Extend grants to buildings outside the district that may be eligible,
- Façade easements,
- Tenant outreach support,
- ‘How-to’ workshops,
- Sales tax discount,
- Additional fee waivers, and
- Flexibility in other zoning regulations.

*For more information on how these and other incentives work, please see the “Strategies for Preservation Incentives” handout from the previous workshop.*

## **PART 5: NEW TRENDS IN PRESERVATION**

### **Can buildings from the 1950s and 1960s be historically significant?**

Many communities are now considering how to treat properties of the “Recent Past,” those buildings that represent post-World War II development in America that now may have achieved historic significance. These include entire residential subdivisions, as well as mid-century commercial strips, auto-oriented drive-ins and other “Googie” buildings, as well as early Modernist designs. As communities continue to plan for the preservation of their historic resources, different approaches may be necessary to recognize and protect those of the “recent past.”

There is substantial debate about the significance of these properties and how they should be treated. Some preservationists argue that Recent Past resources should be evaluated and listed using the same criteria as earlier property types. Others contend that there are too many of them, and that many people will not understand or support the designation of vast numbers of these resource types. Some communities have addressed this disagreement by designating Recent Past resources in limited numbers only, based on more rigorous criteria. With that approach, designated properties must represent the “best” of their type within the community in terms of construction and design quality.

## **PART 6: GREEN BUILDING AND PRESERVATION**

### **Is preserving a historic building a “green” solution?**

Yes. Sustainability through “green” building has become a hot topic and the preservation community is experiencing new pressures to “go green.” The preservation of historic buildings is sustainable in many ways. Sustainability is essentially about stewardship, which, beyond environmental protection, includes cultural, social and economic sustainability. Preserving a historic building will protect the community’s cultural heritage. It will also protect the energy investment made in the building’s construction and ongoing maintenance (its “embodied energy”). Preserving historic buildings can also help stimulate local economies through rehabilitation projects. .

### **Isn’t a new building more energy efficient?**

Not always. Many older buildings have inherent features that are energy efficient if wisely used, and they are adaptable to many new technologies. There is also a substantial amount of “embodied energy” in an existing building that should be taken into account.