Preservation as the Movement of Yes
From Regulation to Community Action: The Expanding Role of Preservation Commissions

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The role of the local preservation commission has evolved significantly over the past 50 years. Originally formed to protect and preserve historic resources in local historic districts, commissions are established by and provided with review authority through an enabling ordinance adopted by a local jurisdiction. The districts they govern often have a set of design guidelines that help commissions evaluate proposed changes to historic buildings and new construction within the district. Owners seek approvals for changes through a Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) process. This remains the primary role of preservation commissions today.

But encouraging property owners to make wise design decisions that enhance the value and appeal of their properties and neighborhoods is just one of the positive ways commissions may serve their communities.

ENHANCED PROFESSIONALISM

Often criticized for being naysayers (the “preservation police”), it is true that some commissions could be accused of taking their regulatory responsibilities too far—nitpicking about minor, reversible choices such as paint colors. But thanks to the training offered by the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions (NAPC) and other specialists, both the perception and reality continue to change.

The signature training offered by NAPC is the Commission Assistance and Mentoring Program (CAMP). The goal of CAMP is to provide high-quality, engaging and informative training to preservation-related boards and commissions of all types through in-person learning that includes presentations, hands-on exercises, group discussions and networking (mentoring) opportunities. These activities are led by preservation professionals knowledgeable
about the work of local preservation commissions, including commissioners; staff members of local, state and national government agencies; attorneys; and commission partners. Some of the topics included on the CAMP menu are Legal Preservation Basics, Preservation Planning, Identification and Designation of Historic Resources, Survey, Building Public Support, Review of Federal Standards and Local Guidelines, Design Review, and Meeting Procedures for Local Commissions—just to name a few.

CAMP has been serving local commissions for more than 15 years. Each year, NAPC provides training services to almost 40 communities nationwide. As a result, commission members are now far more likely to be well versed in the “bigger picture” concerns of design review and better prepared to make fair, consistent and defendable decisions.

EXPANDING ACTIVITIES

Today’s commissions are also more likely to be moving beyond their regulatory duties, extending their outreach to embrace advocacy, address sustainability concerns, promote economic development and document cultural icons.

While a bit clichéd, the notion that “all politics is local” is intrinsic to 21st-century historic preservation practice. The face of local preservation is changing to reflect a growing public appreciation of historic assets. And because the work that local historic preservation programs and commissions do directly affects and is accountable to the public, these bodies continue to adapt and innovate.

The National Alliance of Preservation Commissions is pausing to reflect on the past 50 years of preservation as well as highlight current and future trends during its July 2016 FORUM in Mobile, Alabama. While honoring the need for nuts-and-bolts training, a large part of the program will focus on innovative approaches to preservation practice at the local level. By the end of FORUM, local commissions will have a toolbox of new ideas to implement at home, and NAPC will have marching orders from its constituents for programming and organizational development in the coming years. The themes identified for FORUM 2016 will demonstrate the wide array of approaches embraced by commissions at the local level.
Advocacy

For example, in 2008 the citizens of Louisville, Colorado, enacted a sales tax dedicated to funding historic preservation, largely as the result of advocacy efforts by the local preservation community including several Historic Preservation Commissioners. Proponents were concerned about the loss of the historic character of this dynamic city of 20,000 located just northwest of Denver, consistently rated as one of the most livable communities in the country. Since its adoption, the fund has raised nearly $4 million to assist property owners in preserving historic places and has resulted in the designation of 30 local historic landmarks, including the Louisville Grain Elevator. The Historic Preservation Commission reviews landmark grant applications as well as using the fund to support creative outreach projects, such as booths at community events and school field trips. Over the past year, funds from the tax were used by the Historic Preservation Commission and city staff to develop a citywide historic preservation plan that defines goals for historic preservation and proactively integrates them with other community goals including economic development, creation of affordable housing and response to environmental sustainability concerns. The plan strives to engage the entire community in defining a vision for historic preservation in Louisville for the next

Since enacting a sales tax to fund historic preservation in 2008, Louisville, Colorado, has raised almost $4 million to preserve historic places, enabling the designation of 30 historic landmarks, including the Di Francia Saloon at 740 Front Street, which was celebrated in a landmarking ceremony in May 2015.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE LOUISVILLE HISTORICAL MUSEUM.
The success of an initiative of this magnitude would not be possible without the participation of the Historic Preservation Commission, citizens and community leaders.

Research

Traditional survey methods are being used in not-so-traditional ways in sprawling King County, Washington (which encompasses the city of Seattle and outlying areas). Preservation commissioners have expanded the amount of information available to the county’s historic preservation program. The King County Landmarks Commission had designated four cemeteries as local landmarks, but felt it was important to better understand the range of cemetery types across the county and the issues involved in protecting and maintaining them. Tom Hitzroth, a historian and former chair of the commission, spearheaded the efforts to survey and inventory all of the historic cemeteries in the county, working closely with county historic preservation staff. The work was supported by Certified Local Government grants. Since completion of the survey, the commission initiated the county’s cemetery preservation program, which offers cemetery preservation workshops as well as tours in several cemeteries.

Lorelea Hudson, the archaeologist on the King County Landmarks Commission, recently spearheaded a one-day archaeological survey of a historic Japanese bathhouse (furoba) at the Neely Mansion near Auburn, Washington. The survey was a condition of approval of a COA for a new foundation for the building. However, the nonprofit association that owns the property and is restoring the bathhouse had no funds to conduct the survey. Hudson organized
several partners—including employees from her own company, staff from the regional cultural history museum, anthropology students and members of the historical organization that operates the site—to dig, screen and document their findings during a short window of time when the bathhouse was moved temporarily. Without her willingness to organize the dig, and the commission’s push to investigate the site, the opportunity to learn more about it would have been lost. Not only did this research provide information about the original users, but it will also result in a more accurate restoration of the bathhouse.

**Addressing Emerging Concerns**

Another growing focus of local commissions involves responding to climate change and sea level rise. This concern has grown in urgency as local governments assess new information provided by improved GIS data collection and mapping work done by NOAA
and FEMA. In Annapolis, Maryland, the city’s Historic Preservation Division has led community conversations on the impacts of sea level rise, subsidence and tidal flooding to the historic district. Through public meetings, online surveys and focus groups, the division has prioritized those historic resources that must be protected due to their historic, architectural, cultural, economic or social value to the community. To that end, it is developing a Cultural Resource Hazard Mitigation Plan, a hazard mitigation handbook and design guidelines that will be adopted and used by the Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) to develop mitigation strategies sensitive to historic properties, including protection of key viewsheds and streetscapes. Additionally, the city council has recently amended the city’s Historic Property Tax Credit to add a 25 percent local property tax credit for hazard mitigation work approved by the HPC.

As the first generation of preservationists passes the baton to a newer generation, it is imperative that commissions engage broader audiences (youth, millennials, businesses, partners in non-preservation fields) and address community concerns in a larger way. It is crucial to keep in touch with community needs and gain wider support for resource protection. This will only further enhance the core, traditional values of local historic commissions nationwide. FJ

ESTHER HALL is chair of the board of the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions (NAPC) and member of the Raleigh, North Carolina, Historic Development Commission. NAPC provides technical support and manages an information network to help local commissions accomplish their preservation objectives. It also serves as an advocate at federal, state and local levels of government to promote policies and programs that support preservation commission efforts.