

Town of Reading
Historic District Commission



Design Guidelines
for
Local Historic District

Adopted – May 2006

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Almost all construction work on the outside of a property located in the Historic District, including fences, requires review by the Historic District Commission and in many cases a building permit from the Building Inspector. Always check with the Commission and the Building Inspector before having such exterior work performed.

Introduction

Reading is a rare community in its architecture and history. Few towns have so many homes whose styles and construction methods span three centuries, and a heritage that includes settlement in the mid-1600s and a colonial militia that fought during the Battle of Lexington and Concord.

The Town's Historic District reflects that rich heritage. It was the site of the first settlement in today's Reading and the site for the mustering of the militia on April 19, 1775. The District is a showcase of modest and diverse houses built from the mid-1700s to the Victorian Period to the post-World War II suburban boom. Numerous homes have been honored by being placed on the National Register of Historic Places. This architectural diversity reflects how West Street, like Reading itself, grew from a 17th century farming village to a mature 21st century suburb.

Background

The Historic Districts Act, Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40C, was created to protect and preserve the historic resources of the Commonwealth through a local review system that encourages and ensures compatible improvement and development. In general, local historic districts have three key purposes:

1. To preserve and protect the distinctive characteristics of buildings and places significant to the history of the Commonwealth and its cities and towns;
2. To maintain and improve the settings of those buildings and places; and
3. To assure that new construction is compatible with existing buildings and their historic relationship to other buildings in their vicinity.

Under Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40C and Town of Reading Bylaws, Section 5.18, the Historic District Commission is required to review the architectural appropriateness of most proposed exterior design changes, whether they be a minor alteration, new additions, or removal of trim or structures. Property owners in the Historic District are required to obtain a certificate from the Commission prior to starting any exterior work on buildings or structures. Please note that, by Town Bylaw, the Building Inspector cannot issue a building permit for exterior work or demolition without the necessary certificate from the Commission. Anyone contemplating exterior work should contact the Commission and property owners are encouraged to present preliminary plans at a regularly scheduled Commission meeting to better understand Commission requirements.

Purpose of Guidelines

These Guidelines are intended to help the Commission and homeowners in the Historic District make sure that physical alterations and new construction are done in a manner that respects this heritage and are compatible with the historic architecture and streetscape. They are also intended to help the Commission make consistent and informed decisions about what is and what is not appropriate.

The Guidelines are not meant to prevent change or freeze houses as they are. They are to guide exterior changes as houses are inevitably adapted to contemporary needs and requirements. They are meant to balance individual creativity in design with continuity in the District's physical and cultural character, with the goal of enhancing the quality of the built environment for all residents.

General Guidelines

In the District, the Historic District Commission shall determine whether the proposed construction, alteration or demolition of an exterior architectural feature, as seen from a public way, will be appropriate to preserve the character and appearance of the District. Commission members may refer to the available house-by-house description when reviewing applications to better understand architectural and historic significance.

The Commission also serves as a resource. It can recommend publications and provide information about appropriate design and use of materials.

In the District, each building or structure shall be recognized as a physical and cultural record of its time, place and use. The historic *character* of a building or structure shall be retained and preserved even if the materials are not retained in all cases. The removal of historic materials or alteration of features that characterize a building or structure shall be avoided as determined by the Commission.

The purpose of reviewing a proposal is to make sure any change honors the history and cohesiveness in the architectural style of individual houses and reflects the best qualities of the home's period. For this reason, these guidelines cannot be a prescriptive design manual of simple "do's" and "don'ts." Reasonable judgment is involved, from both the applicants and the Commission.

It is not the intent of the Commission to dictate style or taste by the review process. Rather, it will review the compatibility of a proposal with existing architecture, the site, streetscape, and the community. It will review land coverage, massing (bulk), proportions, design, detail and materials.

General Guidelines - *continued*

Changes and additions to the property and its environment that have taken place over the course of time are evidence of the history of the property and the neighborhood. These changes to the property may have developed significance in their own right, and this significance should be recognized and respected.

The review process will only be extended to the form and detail that are perceptible from a public way. But it is the Commission's authority to determine whether a property and certain features are visible from a public way, and to proceed with the review when appropriate.

Deteriorated historic features should be repaired rather than replaced. All architectural changes shall be appropriate to the original style of the building or structure (if sufficient evidence exists for it), or to its altered style (if it has been significantly altered to reflect characteristics of a later style).

Where the severity of deterioration requires replacement of a distinctive feature, the new feature should match the old in design, color, texture, and the other visual qualities and, where possible, materials. Replacement of missing features should be substantiated by documentary, physical, or pictorial evidence.

Whenever possible, new materials should match the material being replaced with respect to their physical properties, design, color, texture and other visual qualities. The use of imitation replacement materials is discouraged.

Demolition of part or all of a structure is considered to be an alteration to the exterior and is subject to determination of review by the Commission.

When applying for approval to demolish a building, it is necessary for the Commission to approve the proposed footprint of the replacement building. The importance of the old building to the streetscape, as well as its historical significance, will be considered by the Commission.

The District's Characteristics

Characteristics which are encouraged and which contribute to the uniqueness of the District include:

- Modest designs that are residential in scale and with such elements as porches, dormers, etc.
- Emphasis on craftsmanship for overall design as well as detail
- Use of natural materials
- Compact but not oversized ratio of building mass (bulk) to land
- Variety of vernacular architectural styles with an emphasis on simplicity of design

General Principles for Design Used in a Review

Character – Is the proposal appropriate to the existing community character which is illustrated by the variety of architectural styles?

Harmony – Does the proposal have a consistency and unity of form and detail which is separate from style and building type?

Site Context – How successful is the relationship between a proposal and its surroundings relative to setbacks, heights, and the harmony and character of streetscape?

Spatial Relationship – Does the proposal address the issue of varying sizes of front, side and rear spaces in relation to site and adjacent properties?

Specific Principles for Design

Scale – Does the proposal demonstrate a balance relationship in the parts of the design and a domestic scale consistent with other structures in the district?

Height – Does it have relationship of height to that of adjacent properties which tend to be consistent within streetscapes of areas of the overall community?

Massing/Bulk – Is there an overall relationship of the building size and scale relative to the lot and to surrounding properties?

Setback – Does the relationship to site and to streetscape maintain balance and harmony within the streetscape?

Roof – Are the shapes and angles consistent with surrounding roof shapes and pitches to maintain balance and setbacks and visual lines?

Fenestration – Do the patterns and rhythms of windows and doors maintain a balance, which can be symmetrical or asymmetrical and convey a sense of function?

Materials – Is the exterior cladding, roof, window, door, and architectural trim compatible with materials used in the district?

Surface Treatments – Is there an overall harmony of texture and detail?

Examples of Items Subject to Review

The following list of examples of the *most frequent items* as seen from a public way that are subject to review should be considered to be a guideline only. It is not intended to be all-inclusive.

- Exterior HVAC equipment (excluding window air conditioners)
- Exterior lighting fixtures
- Garden houses/storage sheds
- Non-vegetative landscaping (fencing, walls, drive/pathways)
- Outside stairs (except as required by Law)
- Roofing
- Roof Decks
- Siding
- Skylights
- Street furniture
- Swimming pools
- Temporary garages
- Trellises
- Windows

Exemptions From Review

- Chimney caps
- Paint color
- Flagpoles, sculpture mailboxes (freestanding or attached), window boxes, house numbers
- Gutters and downspouts
- Interior items such as features, colors, or materials
- Mechanical and plumbing vents
- Ordinary maintenance and Repair of any exterior architectural feature of buildings and structures within the historic district. (“Ordinary maintenance and repair” does not include replacement, or changes of materials, design, or size of the existing feature.)
- Outdoor furniture
- Plant materials/trees
- Play sets
- Solar Panels
- Storm windows and doors
- Satellite antennae or similar mechanical equipment
- Temporary signs or structures for celebrations, charitable drives or other purposes
- Terraces, walks, sidewalks or similar structures, provided that any such structure is substantially at grade level.

Further Advice

Fencing – Natural fencing is encouraged where possible. Wire fencing may be installed inside hedges to make them less child, pet, and ball permeable. Fences of wood, stone, brick or iron are encouraged; vinyl or other synthetic fences are not an appropriate material in the district. Fences across the front of a property are discouraged, especially across the front of a house. Stone walls should be left intact.

Roofing – Whenever possible retain original roof covering or replace deteriorated roof covering with material that matches the old in composition, color, size, shape, texture and installation detail.

Shutters – Shutter size is an important component; generally they are to be one-half the size of the window so that they can close and cover the height of the window or appear to do so.

Siding – The use of aluminum, vinyl or other synthetic siding is generally discouraged.

Masonry – Wherever possible, original masonry and mortar should be retained. Original mortar should be duplicated in composition, texture, joint size, joint profile and method of application. Deteriorated masonry should be repaired and replaced with material which matches as closely as possible the original.

Windows and Doors – The opening dimensions of original and later doors and windows are best preserved, as are original or later important window elements such as sash, lintels, sill, architrave, glass, shutters and other decorative elements and hardware.

Policy Regarding New Technology

The Commission recognizes the importance of and encourages the use of energy efficient technologies and their use within the District.

When an application is filed that includes use of new technology that is not already addressed in the District's Guidelines, then efforts to evaluate the visual impact on the District as a whole and the impact to a structure shall be considered. Both the long-term effect on the District and adherence to the established Guidelines shall be reviewed. Overall visual impact shall take precedence particularly concerning outside wiring, conductive tubes or piping or any other means to conceal heating/cooling conduits or associated products. The goal of review will be to ensure that the effect of the new technology on the exterior appearance of the structure is minimized (i.e., located behind the house, screened with foliage, painted to match the house, etc.).

New technologies shall include but not be limited to the following:

1. Energy efficient technology such as HVAC mini-splits, EV charging stations, etc.
2. A/V equipment, outside televisions, etc.

Exceptions:

1. Solar installations are protected under M.G.L. Chapter 40 Section 3 and are not subject to this Policy.
2. Window air conditioning units.



Historic District Commission

Application for Certificate

General Bylaw Section 7.3

The application needs to be dropped off and date stamped at the Public Service Department to begin the process

Certificate Requested: Please read application information and instructions

- Appropriateness** – for work described herein
- Hardship** – financial or otherwise described herein and does not conflict substantially with the intent and purposes of the bylaw
- Non-Applicability** – for the reason(s) described below. See Guidelines for further information

Property Address _____ **Date Built** _____

Owner Name(s) _____

Phone Number(s) (H) _____ **(C)** _____ **Email** _____

Owners Address _____

Contractor & Company Name _____

Contractor's Address _____

Phone Number(s) (W) _____ **(C)** _____ **Email** _____

Anticipated work dates: **Start:** _____ **Completion:** _____

Work Description: Please describe how the proposed work is historically/architecturally compatible with the building and the District as a whole. (Attached additional pages as necessary)

Required documentation to be attached: Failure to provide sufficient documentation could delay action upon application. (See attached instructions)

- Detailed plans/drawings
- Existing and proposed site or plot plans
- Existing conditions photographs of structure and areas affected
- Material samples and/or product literature
- Other: _____

By signing below, I agree that I have read the attached instructions and to the best of my knowledge, the information contained in this application is accurate and complete. I give permission for members of the HDC to access the property for the purpose of reviewing this application and work done under any certificate issued to me. I also give permission for the contractor to act on my behalf, in matters relative to work authorized by this application

Owner Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Owners Printed Name: _____

Contractor Signature: _____ **Date:** _____

Contractor Printed Name: _____

Please Submit to the Public Services Department, Reading Town Hall:

- 9 copies of completed application
- 1 copy of request for certified abutters list

Updated 1/27/2020

Application Information and Instructions

Contact the Commission before you begin any exterior work within the historic district: Property owners in the Historic District are required to obtain a certificate from the Commission prior to starting any exterior work on buildings or structures. *The application is to be filled out and submitted to the Public Services Department at Reading Town Hall.* Once an application is received, the Commission will determine within 14 days whether the proposal is subject to review by the Commission and will require a public hearing. Such hearing is to be held within 45 days of receipt of application. Please note that, by Town Bylaw, the Building Inspector cannot issue a building permit for exterior work or demolition without the necessary certificate from this Commission. Anyone contemplating exterior work should contact the Commission. Property owners are encouraged to present preliminary plans at a regularly scheduled Commission meeting to better understand Commission requirements.

Summary of Commission Authority: The Historic Districts Act, Massachusetts General Laws Chapter 40C, was created to protect and preserve the historic resources of the Commonwealth through a local review system that encourages and ensures compatible improvement and development. Under Chapter 40C and Town Bylaw, the Historic District Commission is required to review the architectural appropriateness of most proposed exterior design changes, whether they be a minor alteration, new additions, or removal of trim or structures. The applicant bears the burden of establishing that the proposed work is not inconsistent with the historic nature of the district. The Commission will issue a Certificate of Non-Applicability for items specifically excluded from review. Failure to comply with the Reading Town Bylaws establishing the Historic District by failing to obtain a required certificate or refusing to cease uncertified work can result in penalties as described in Reading General Bylaw Section 1.8.

Types of Certificates:

Certificate of Appropriateness – Required for exterior alterations and new construction that is subject to public view unless specifically exempted by the Bylaw.

Certificate of Non-Applicability – Issued for matters that are specifically excluded from review under the Bylaw.

Certificate of Hardship – Issued when the denial of a Certificate would constitute a hardship, financial or otherwise, on the property owner and if the proposed work does not conflict substantially with the intent and purposes of the Bylaw. Approval of a Certificate of Hardship requires detailed documentation of specific hardship to an individual property owner.

Required Documentation: In addition to the documentation specifically listed on the application form, a “Request for Certified Abutters List” is required. This form should be filled out and submitted along with the application. Please check off the appropriate boxes on the application to indicate which of the required documentation is attached. It is best to provide as much documentation in advance of the hearing to expedite the process. Required documentation can be presented at the formal hearing, however, this may delay action on the application. Based on the complexity or unique nature of a particular project, the Commission may, as allowed by law, require additional information. Failure to provide sufficient documentation could delay approval or be cause for a negative determination.

Contact Information: The Commission typically meets once a month at 7:00PM. The meetings are held at the Reading Town Hall, 16 Lowell Street. **Completed applications should be submitted to the Public Services Department located in the Reading Town Hall.** Any inquiries should be directed to the Commission’s Chair at HDC@ci.reading.ma.us.

Updated 1/27/2020

Application Process and Procedures
General Bylaw Section 7.3.

Step 1:

Submit Application for Certificate to Historic District Commission (HDC). **Submit to the Public Service Department in Town Hall.**

Applications should include plans, elevations, and specifications about materials, colors, demolition or removal, a statement of proposed work and description of the existing conditions.

Step 2:

The HDC will review the application and determine if it is within the jurisdiction of the Commission. A determination will be made within 14 days of the date the application was received.

If the Commission determines that the proposal is not subject to the Commission's review then the Commission will issue a Certificate of Non-Applicability.

If the Commission determines that the application involves exterior architectural features subject to review under this by-law, it may hold a public hearing, unless it is determined the hearing can be waived. The public hearing shall be held within 45 days from the date the application was received.

Note: A public hearing may be waived by the Commission if work is determined to be insubstantial and can be reviewed without a public hearing. However, the applicant will be responsible for mailing cost to inform the abutters. Ten (10) days shall elapse after the mailing of such notice before the Commission may act upon such application and after considering any responses.

Step 3:

Fourteen days before the hearing, notice shall be given by posting in a conspicuous place in Town Hall and in a newspaper of general circulation in Reading. Concurrently, a copy of public notice shall be mailed to the applicant and to the owners of properties within 300 feet. The applicant is responsible for the costs of the mailing and advertising. **Abutters envelopes must be turned into the Public Service Department at noon, 16 days before the meeting. If the 16th day falls on Friday, Saturday, Sunday or Holiday they must be turned in by noon on the Thursday before.** *Please note that if the envelopes are not received in time then the Public Hearing would need to be rescheduled and the applicant will have to pay a re-advertisement fee.*

Step 4:

The Commission will disapprove the application or issue a certificate within 60 days from the date the application was received and stamped.

In the case of disapproval, the Commission will write a letter to the applicant explaining the reasons for disapproval and recommendations for changes for approval. The applicant may then file the application with the changes in a subsequent application.

The Certificate or Letter-of-Disapproval will be filed with the Town Clerk and Building Department.

If the Commission should fail to issue a Certificate or disapproval within 60 days of the application for a Certificate, the Commission shall thereupon issue a Certificate of Hardship due to failure to act.

Anyone aggrieved by a determination of the Commission may, within 20 days of the issuance of a Letter-of-Disapproval, file a written request for a review by a person acting as arbitrator and designated by the Boston Metropolitan Area Planning Agency. The finding of the review shall be filed with the Town Clerk within 45 days after the request.

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