

WEST NEWTON HILL LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT (LHD) proposal

Concerns and clarifications

About 130 communities in Massachusetts with buildings of architectural and historic merit have chosen to set up Local Historic Districts. To understand why see the [West Newton Hill Study Report](#) and the detailed [FAQ](#). There are some common concerns and misunderstandings which are addressed here.

1. *Leave me alone. I should be able to do with my house what I want to do.*

A. All of us who choose to live in Newton already have restrictions on our properties such as: building codes (including the Newton Energy “Stretch Code”); zoning codes; and historic regulations from the 1980’s applicable to additions to all homes over 50 years old. These restrictions also provide some reassurance on what our neighbors can or cannot do.

The proposal from the West Newton Hill Preservation Initiative would involve a local commission, which will be more knowledgeable about our neighborhood than the citywide commission, to determine the appropriateness of proposed changes and provide advice. In any case, with an LHD, you can proceed with any changes you want to make inside the house as well as changing exterior features that are not visible from a public way.

2. *I don’t want a new commission to substitute its sense of style for mine.*

A. A local historic commission would not impose style considerations; it would just determine whether proposed changes are compatible with existing neighborhood characteristics such as massing, location of garage, front porches, scale, roof lines, and materials. Zoning regulations address somewhat different issues and in any case do not address preservation.

3. *This will lower property values.*

A. No, it won’t. It hasn’t in the other Newton historic districts, nor in many other districts throughout New England and nationwide, according to numerous research studies by realtors, State Historic Commissions, and economists. On the other hand, neighborhoods that are dominated by new houses are not hard to find. By curating what is distinctive about our unique neighborhood, character and history could be retained. These are attributes that can not be suddenly acquired. In fact, based on comparable neighborhoods, property values relative to other areas could improve by maintaining what has made West Newton Hill distinctive.

4. *This will add time and expense to the process.*

A. No, It shouldn't, if you start by visiting the local commission to learn what principles and characteristics they expect to see in your new plans and if you work with architects and builders who understand the context and historic styles of houses around you. The process can then proceed more smoothly than now with the citywide commission. In addition, you may receive suggestions that will improve your project. This is happening in existing districts.

A local historic commission is a resource designed to provide assistance in navigating the approval process and in the development of the design at the earliest stages, feedback that is notably absent in current citywide process. The surprises that can occur in the City review process would be greatly reduced, a major advantage of a local district.

5. *We should let the market decide.*

A. Look at the results of market forces around us. Do you think that the new structures you see have improved the character of the neighborhood? To a considerable extent, the market for new construction is controlled by developers who tend to have a shorter-term perspective and a focus on maximizing square footage rather than on the fabric and character of the whole neighborhood.

6. *The Boston area needs higher-density development, for example, accessory apartments.*

A. The local historic district proposal does not go against accessory apartments. For example, having apartments in carriage houses is a way to facilitate an increase in housing density without new construction.

7. *Why not just tear down houses?*

A. Many houses on West Newton Hill have a history, tied up in the lives of the first families to settle in the neighborhood. This will fade from memory if the house is removed. The study report available on this [website](#) highlights the history and notable architecture in the neighborhood. In addition, historic preservation has environmental and economic benefits to the community, compared to demolition and new construction: conservation of construction materials; preservation of valuable trees; creation of more jobs per dollar spent; and more use of locally sourced labor and materials. However, some newer, mid-20th century houses may not necessarily merit preservation and in those cases demolition would not be automatically prevented.

To find out more, see www.wnhpreservation.org or contact wnhpreservation@gmail.com.

To read an alternative perspective advocating more leniency for developers see this [website](#).