

Preservation tools for neighborhoods



Ellen Harris

Did you know that Savannah has dozens of historic neighborhoods that have no formal recognition or protective measures in place? That's because these programs typically have to be initiated by the residents or a neighborhood association, and often, many simply aren't aware of their existence.

The types of recognition and protection can vary by program, so it's important to understand the differences between them to make sure the goals of the neighborhood and the program are consistent.

The most basic preservation tool for a historic neighborhood is documentation. There are standardized forms, called

Historic Resource Survey Cards, which can be used to document the existing historic buildings. This is typically the first step in pursuing some of the other programs. Knowledge is power and much can be learned about the history and significance of a neighborhood from completing a historic resource survey.

Another form of documentation popular with many neighborhoods is one or more historical markers. The state has a historic marker program administered through the Georgia Historical Society which places markers at significant sites around the state.

Listing as a National Register Historic District can be a time-consuming and labor-intensive process, but it brings rich rewards. It is a federal recognition of the significance of a neighborhood and it qualifies property owners within the district for significant tax incentives like the state 25% tax credit on qualified rehabilitation

costs, and the state property tax freeze on the pre-rehabilitation value of a building. The benefits are even greater if the property is income-producing, which can qualify for an additional 20% federal tax credit. In return, the rehabilitations must be consistent with the Secretary of the Interior's Standards. These programs are voluntary and listing on the National Register does not restrict alterations to a building unless these programs are applied for. In other words, if you want the tax incentives, there are some strings attached. If you don't want the incentives, you can do what you want.

Listing as a local historic district is a zoning change which must be approved by City Council. As a local historic district, all exterior alterations and new construction are subject to review to ensure consistency with the design standards adopted for the individual district.

This is the most powerful tool neighborhoods have to protect their historic resources and neighborhood character, but it can also be the most controversial because of the perceived infringement on property rights. Currently, Savannah has only four local historic districts.

Recently, through the leadership of the Ardsley Park-Chatham Crescent Neighborhood Association, the City of Savannah created a new tool for historic neighborhoods -- the conservation district. Listing as a conservation district is essentially a zoning overlay which limits demolitions of historic buildings only when absolutely necessary. No other alterations are reviewed. There are currently four local conservation districts.

Historic neighborhoods have a variety of preservation tools at their disposal. Many neighborhoods take advantage of several tools

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and it's certainly not a one-size-fits all approach. The most important thing is for

neighborhoods to be informed, proactive and choose the right program for their neighborhood needs. *Ellen I. Harris, LEED AP, AICP is a co-founder and principal of Ethos Preservation.*

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