

# Historic communities plead “regulate me”

By Shannon Hill, Preservation Planner, Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission

Most people would vote “no” to the idea of more regulation in their lives. It’s a rational, if knee-jerk, reaction. In older neighborhoods and downtowns, however, owners increasingly look with favor on local historic area designation—and the accompanying regulation—as a way to protect the character of the district, boost pride and property values, and attract additional investment in streetscape and other improvements.

“Official” historic districts may be listed in the National Register of Historic Places (see pp. 8-9) or they may be designated by local municipalities. Listing in the National Register confers *federal* recognition and conveys great esteem. However, the National Register offers protection from demolition and alterations that can destroy an old building’s character **only** when federal dollars are involved.

Local designation provides much broader protection for historic places. Forty municipalities—from small towns to big cities—have created local preservation commissions. Sometimes called review boards, these bodies establish local designation and regulatory processes.

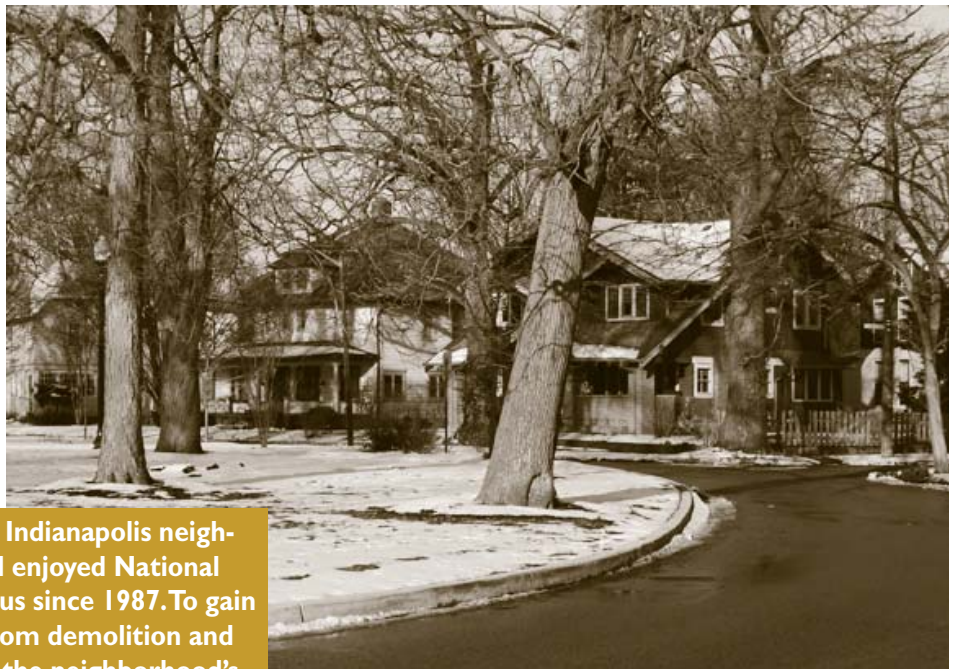
Why would owners want more regulation applied to their property? Studies have repeatedly shown that local designa-

tion boosts property values. The stability and certainty offered by local historic district status is similar to the assurances and covenants offered to buyers of new homes in suburban subdivisions.

A local historic district may include a single structure or encompass dozens, even thousands, of buildings. India-

napolis’s Irvington Historic District—approximately 2,800 structures, displays Romantic landscape principles popularized in the late nineteenth century. The district’s winding, tree-lined streets contain examples of every major American architectural style popular between 1870 and 1950.

Between 2001 and 2004, a majority of Irvington owners signed a petition



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**Irvington, an Indianapolis neighborhood, had enjoyed National Register status since 1987. To gain protection from demolition and alteration of the neighborhood’s distinctive features, residents sought local designation and regulation by the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission in 2004.**

requesting local historic district status and regulation by the Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission (IHPC). Residents were concerned about the demolition of historic structures in the area, especially along Washington Street, one of Irvington’s most visible thoroughfares. The area had been listed in the National Register since 1987. IHPC guidelines

for the Irvington district regulate new construction, demolition, land use, and exterior renovation.

In South Bend, the significance of the East Wayne Street Historic District rests in its ties to the auto-pioneering Studebaker family and its distinctive landscape design. Jacob and John Studebaker built country estates on land that would eventually become the Sunnymede development. The homes of other prominent industrialists followed in Sunnymede, platted in 1925. The East Wayne Street Historic District is located within the Sunnymede Addition.

The Historic Preservation Commission of South Bend and Saint Joseph County collaborated with residents to tailor guidelines that regulate exterior changes to buildings and protect the district’s significant features. For example, to preserve the original landscape design of curvilinear, tree-lined streets, parks, and open spaces, regulation of landscaping is more restrictive than in the city’s other local districts.

In Huntington, the Historic Review Board draws up guidelines for locally designated individual historic sites,



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sometimes approaching homeowners about designation, and sometimes responding to requests from homeowners. The guidelines generally prevent the owner from making exterior changes that would compromise the building's historic appearance. "Most homeowners who are interested in designation want to see their homes protected long-term, and that desire outweighs the inconvenience of the regulation," says Cathy Wright, who heads Historic Landmarks' North Central Field Office and provides professional management for the Huntington Historic Review Board.

The late David Schenkel, a former Historic Landmarks Foundation board member, sought local designation for two late nineteenth-century double houses he owned in Huntington. Regardless of ownership changes, the review board's guidelines for the two-home local district provide direction for owners on exterior preservation.

Preservation commissions rely on the guidelines crafted for each district in deciding whether proposed work should be approved or denied. Generally, new construction (including additions), demolition, and exterior

**Local preservation districts can be large or small. In contrast to the 2,800-building Irvington district in Indianapolis, Huntington's Historic Review Board has designated single structures (954 Poplar Street, left) and a two-home district on Market Street (right).**

changes are subject to review and approval, but each district within a city may have different guidelines, with some more and others less restrictive. Occasionally designation may include regulation of interior modifications. In Indianapolis, for instance, the interiors of Union Station and Circle Theater—two highly-significant individual landmarks—are included in the local designation.

Guidelines for local historic districts are typically based on the *Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation* developed by the National Park Service—the "bible" for proper preservation practice. The standards encourage preservation of significant architectural details; repair rather than replacement; replacement in-kind when necessary; and, when an addition is necessary, a design that complements rather than

distracts from or dominates the historic structure.

Commissions and review boards are usually made up of people appointed for a set term by locally-elected officials. Some ordinances require that at least one or more member(s) live in a designated area, or possess professional expertise in law, history, or architecture. In larger cities, preservation commissions often have professional staff, while in smaller communities they may be all-volunteer operations. Some cities and small towns, like Huntington, contract with Historic Landmarks Foundation to perform the role of commission staff.

If you have questions about local historic district designation, contact the preservation commission or review board in your community. If no commission exists, contact Historic Landmarks Foundation's office nearest you for more detailed explanations of district guidelines, the typical approval process, and how to get a commission started or an area designated.

[Click here](#) for more information on groups and resources pertaining to local historic district designation.