



HCCDC Statement on Conservancy's Historic District nomination
27 March 2024

Historic Chevy Chase DC does not support the current nomination to create a historic district in Chevy Chase DC.

Historic Chevy Chase DC has celebrated and documented the history of this community for more than 30 years. It is governed by an active and working board of directors whose members deeply care about the look and feel of the neighborhood. There have been nearly 70 board members in its 34-year history.

We base our decision not to support the nomination on decades-long engagement with preservation issues in our Chevy Chase DC neighborhood that began with the founding of our organization in the early 1990s and continues to this day.

HCCDC organized the first and only other campaign for a historic district from 2004 to 2008. That campaign was based on an inventory of buildings in a broader area and narrower period of significance than the Conservancy's. Meetings were organized block by block in the affected area in order to explain the rationale for the proposed district as well as to listen to neighbors' concerns. ANC 3-4/G conducted a survey that resulted in a high rate of response and an overwhelming rejection of the plan by a margin of 77 to 22 percent. We listened to our neighbors, respected their opinions, and decided not to file the application.

Nothing has changed about the nature of the neighborhood since then or the merits of the historic district. Indeed, we note that the Conservancy's current nomination seems copied in large measure from the HCCDC 2008 proposal.

HCCDC has learned something valuable from its engagement with the community over the last 15 years. We learned that preservation efforts in this neighborhood do not require formal government action and oversight. We discovered that our neighbors have both the means and the desire to maintain and further develop the eclectic styles that have defined Chevy Chase since 1907. The Conservancy's application rightly celebrates this eclecticism but fails to understand that this genius lives on in the choices that are made by the people who live here. The neighborhood has developed organically and HCCDC wishes to support and preserve this spirit. Chevy Chase DC does not need to be saved from itself.

As noted, the Conservancy bases its application on the original HCCDC application, however, the rationale for restricting its geographic scope and extending the period of significance is unclear at best. HCCDC is sympathetic

to preservation. We have approached preservation in a balanced manner, proposing protection for worthy sites: the Arcade, Chevy Chase Bank, the Avalon Theater. We have taken an active role as well in discussions with the National Park Service with respect to Chevy Chase Circle. HCCDC has helped install over 300 plaques on houses in the neighborhood. Recently we have launched a program restoring neighborhood call boxes with art and text. In short, Chevy Chase DC already is an active community engaged in preservation work. Given this level of interest and engagement, we do not believe a blanket regulatory approach is required in Chevy Chase.

Since the 2008 campaign, HCCDC has led the community in discovering the racist origins of our map. Along with the rest of the country, Chevy Chase DC has become more attentive to the racial dimension of American history. The HCCDC board became much more focused on how this history played out locally. It is undeniably the case that the displacement of African Americans formed a central motif in the formation of this neighborhood, creating a demographic legacy that lives on into the present. HCCDC took its role as community leader seriously in rediscovering and acknowledging this history and its local consequences. This work is also a project of preservation.

HCCDC is on record supporting the aims of the Small Area Plan exercise undertaken by the DC Office of Planning 2021-2023, i.e., creating a more diverse, vibrant, welcoming community. As a matter of priority HCCDC supports this vision, specifically the inclusion of income-integrated housing. Until we have progress on this project, a more inclusive Chevy Chase is substantially more important than the addition of a 38th residential historic district.

We trust that the HPRB will take seriously its mission to act in the interests of the city as a whole in this matter. This is how HCCDC is assessing the nomination and our role. Though our neighborhood's contribution would be modest, we believe it would send an important signal to other areas west of Rock Creek Park that every neighborhood should be taking part in this effort. In weighing competing priorities, we believe that historic district designation at this time would have the unfortunate effect of appearing to perpetuate the racial, ethnic, and religious exclusivity on the basis of which Chevy Chase was originally conceived and executed.

The timing and content of the Conservancy's historic district nomination make it clear that opposition to the civic core redevelopment is at the heart of its mobilization efforts. Accordingly, this is a major test of the priorities underlying the redevelopment of the civic core on Connecticut Avenue. By extending the period of significance to 1964, the nomination would make the Wells Fargo Bank at 5701 Connecticut a Contributing Structure; demolition would be prohibited, and a likely site for redevelopment of the east side of Connecticut Avenue -- for mixed use, shops and housing -- would be preempted. The timing and scope of the Conservancy's proposal is at odds with the other widely debated and discussed improvements for the neighborhood. We believe the spirit of progress and renewal demands inclusion of affordable housing as foreseen by the Small Area Plan, supported by ANC 3-4G, and adopted by the DC Council. These improvements would be imperiled by adoption of the Conservancy's proposals.

In sum, we conclude that a historic district as defined in the Conservancy's nomination is not warranted or welcomed.

- A historic district in the specific circumstances of Chevy Chase would undermine the pattern of organic, eclectic development that already exists.
- With HCCDC, preservation efforts already have an active advocate in the neighborhood.

- In balancing priorities, redevelopment of the Connecticut Avenue corridor in Chevy Chase should contribute to resolving the housing crisis with affordable units, a strategic goal of the DC government with which we agree.