

Designating Your Home As ‘Historic’ Was A Bad Idea in 2008 It Is A Terrible Idea Today – Part I

Living Chevy Chase is a group of homeowners who believe that a “Historic District” would not accomplish anything useful, but would instead impose obstacles, hassles, and costs whenever a homeowner wanted to make even modest repairs. Fourteen years ago, our community voted overwhelmingly against a proposal for an historic district. We did so for reasons which were valid then and are valid now:

Has your house ever needed (or might it in the future need) one of the ordinary maintenance and repair tasks below? Does your masonry need repointing, rotten siding or a rusted gutter replaced, etc.? Today, these projects require no permit at all or a simple online “postcard permit.” In a historic district, watch out for added expense and hassle in dealing with the preservation bureaucracy on any of these projects:

- Repointing, cleaning and waterproofing masonry * Replacing a walkway or driveway or patio
- Replacing roofing, including shingles * Replacing siding, gutters or downspouts
- Installing a garden shed or retaining wall * Installing or replacing air conditioning unit, utility meter
- Replacing up to 5 windows or 5 doors * Repairing or replacing a fence, exterior stairs or handrails
- Repairing or altering front or rear porch or deck * Exterior venting new furnace, water heater, stove
- **Solar panels** – depending on the orientation and shape of your roof, you may have to locate them in a less efficient place, use fewer of them and/or use more expensive or less efficient materials.

In an historic district, all these everyday projects above will require an in-person visit by you (or your contractor, at your expense) to the Historic Preservation Office (HPO).

- Even proponents of a historic district say that the *average* delay will be 3-4 days. (That figure does not count the numerous projects that homeowners never undertake or simply abandon rather than complying with the bureaucracy’s aesthetic choices on even the most minor matters.)
- But the delay can be much longer, and much more expensive:
 - If a bureaucrat doesn’t like your project, you may have to hire an architectural consultant or other expert to try to convince the Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) to let you proceed
 - You may be required to submit extensive plans and documentation, or redo the plans repeatedly to comply with HPO’s view of how your house should look, down to the smallest details
 - Process can take months (or longer), with no guarantee of success
 - A helpful chart of the “simple” HPRB process (not including possible litigation that would follow a denial), prepared by HPRB itself in 2022, is attached.

No change is too trivial for the HPO or HPRB to insist on their aesthetic choices. Many of these are imposed by the bureaucracy behind the scenes and never seen in the public record. But in recent cases, HPRB has:

- Insisted that solar panels be “arranged in a more composed manner” and mounted four inches – rather than 6 inches – above a roof
- Required on a new *rear* addition that “the windows . . . be organized in a more balanced composition, and that an awning be provided over the side basement door”
- Required that a stairway connecting two parts of a roof deck be spiral, rather than straight-line

- Required a very expensive 15 panes-over-1 pane double-hung replacement window, rather than the 1-over-1 configuration that the homeowner wanted

More significant projects, such as *any* change whatsoever to the façade of your house or any substantial change elsewhere on the exterior would become much much more difficult and expensive (if allowed at all)

- Enforcement is haphazard and depends significantly on whether a neighbor, someone with a grudge, some other busybody objects. HPRB has often denied permits that were supported (sometimes unanimously) by near neighbors, and even the local ANC.
- HPRB can impose their aesthetic choices on you. Here are just a few examples:
 - Replace a broken cement walkway with attractive flagstones? Not in a historic district.
 - Replace a broken window *with the same type of window*? HPRB says you have to install an expensive repair or replacement *that matches what was originally there* – even if the original window has been gone for years.
 - Replace rotten wood siding with a modern composite board that looks identical from the street and is much more durable? HPRB fights this tooth and nail, requiring further expensive, time-consuming, and uncertain appeals
 - Replace an old, broken-down garage with a more modern structure or bigger yard area? Nope – not if the garage was original to the house and HPRB deems it a “contributing structure.”
 - Install solar panels? Only subject to strict limitations that increase the expense and likely limit the number and efficiency of panels you can install.
 - Need a new entrance to your basement or a replacement for the stairway on a roof deck or in a side yard? Not if HPRB doesn’t like the design or placement. Even if HPRB will let you, you must comply (whatever the expense) with HPRB’s aesthetic choices, down to the smallest detail.

Proponents are trying to cram a historic district down your throat and give control of your house to the HPRB! For more info, get in touch. If you’re willing to help, even better – we need all the help we can get. And visit our website: LivingChevyChase.com

At the very least we are asking that you not commit to supporting historic designation and that you keep an open mind until after you have had a chance to hear from both sides.

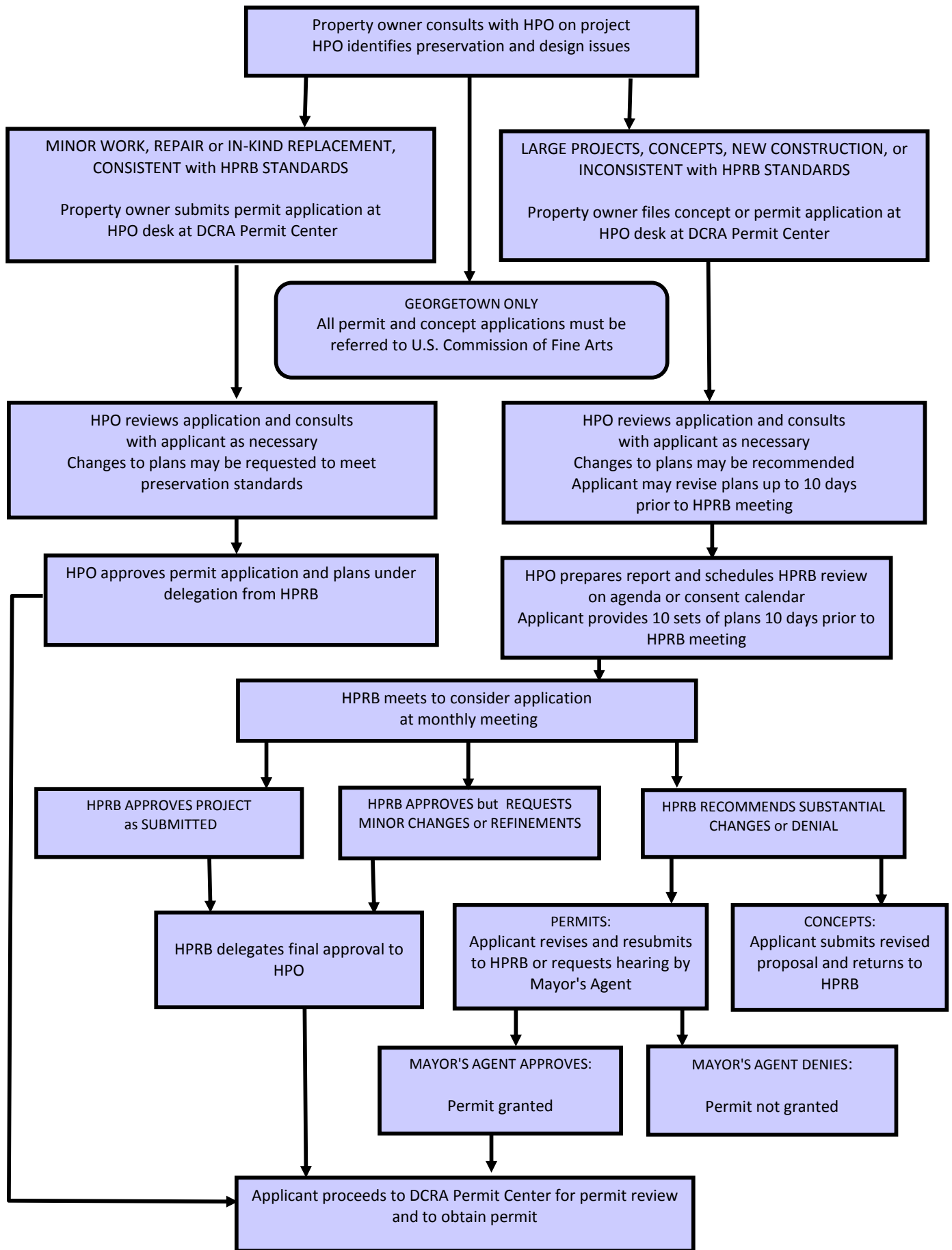
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For more information, please check out the following websites:

- LivingChevyChase.com
- **HPO Main Page** - <https://planning.dc.gov/page/historic-preservation-office>
- **Work Qualifying for HPO Review** - <https://planning.dc.gov/node/1180431>
- **Historic Property – Special Permit** - <https://dcra.dc.gov/node/1423961>
- **HPRB Design Guidelines By Topic** - <https://planning.dc.gov/node/1183905>

HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW PROCESS



Official chart copied from Guide to Preservation Review at <https://planning.dc.gov/node/917422> (page 7) (copied 9/21/22).
 Note: This simplified chart does not include the additional litigation process after a permit denial.