
**Preservation in a Growing City:
A Consideration of Conservation Districts
for Washington, DC Neighborhoods**

**Darcy Buckley
December 17, 2013**



Introduction

Problem Statement

In a period of return to the city, this paper addresses our current preservation tool kit's efficacy for protecting historic urban neighborhoods' defining identity and sense of place.



Introduction

Research Questions

- ✦ Are Conservation Districts an appropriate tool for Washington neighborhoods?
- ✦ How have Conservation Districts been used in other cities?
- ✦ What would a Conservation District program look like in DC?
- ✦ What are the strengths and weaknesses of this tool?



Introduction

Methodology

✦ Case study of two DC neighborhoods, Bloomingdale and Eckington, which face the challenge of welcoming change and growth while maintaining neighborhood identity, community character and sense of place



Introduction

Methodology

✦ Identified and analyzed the existing legal and political environment of the District of Columbia, as well as the material fabric of Bloomingdale and Eckington, through historic research, site visits, review of relevant plans and studies, Census data, consultation with the DC Historic Preservation Office (HPO), and discussions with residents.



Introduction

Contributions

- ✦ Useful for Eckington and Bloomingdale, as well as other DC neighborhoods
- ✦ Applications for cities nationwide
- ✦ Adds to small but growing field of academic literature on Conservation Districts



Introduction

Outline

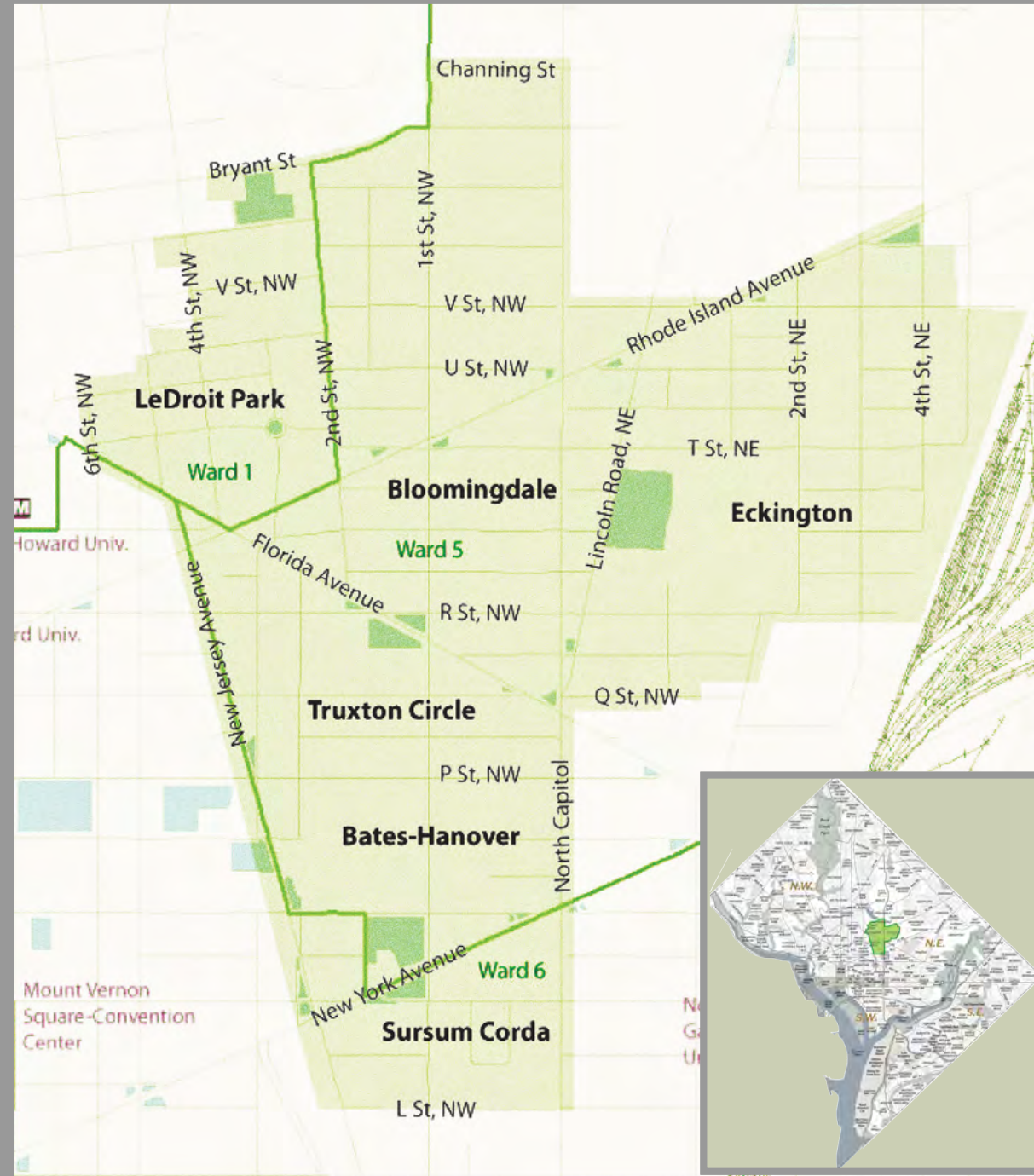
- ✦ Context
- ✦ Neighborhood Analysis
- ✦ Current Tools
- ✦ Conservation District Precedents
- ✦ Recommendations
- ✦ Conclusion



Overview

Mid City East Small Area Plan

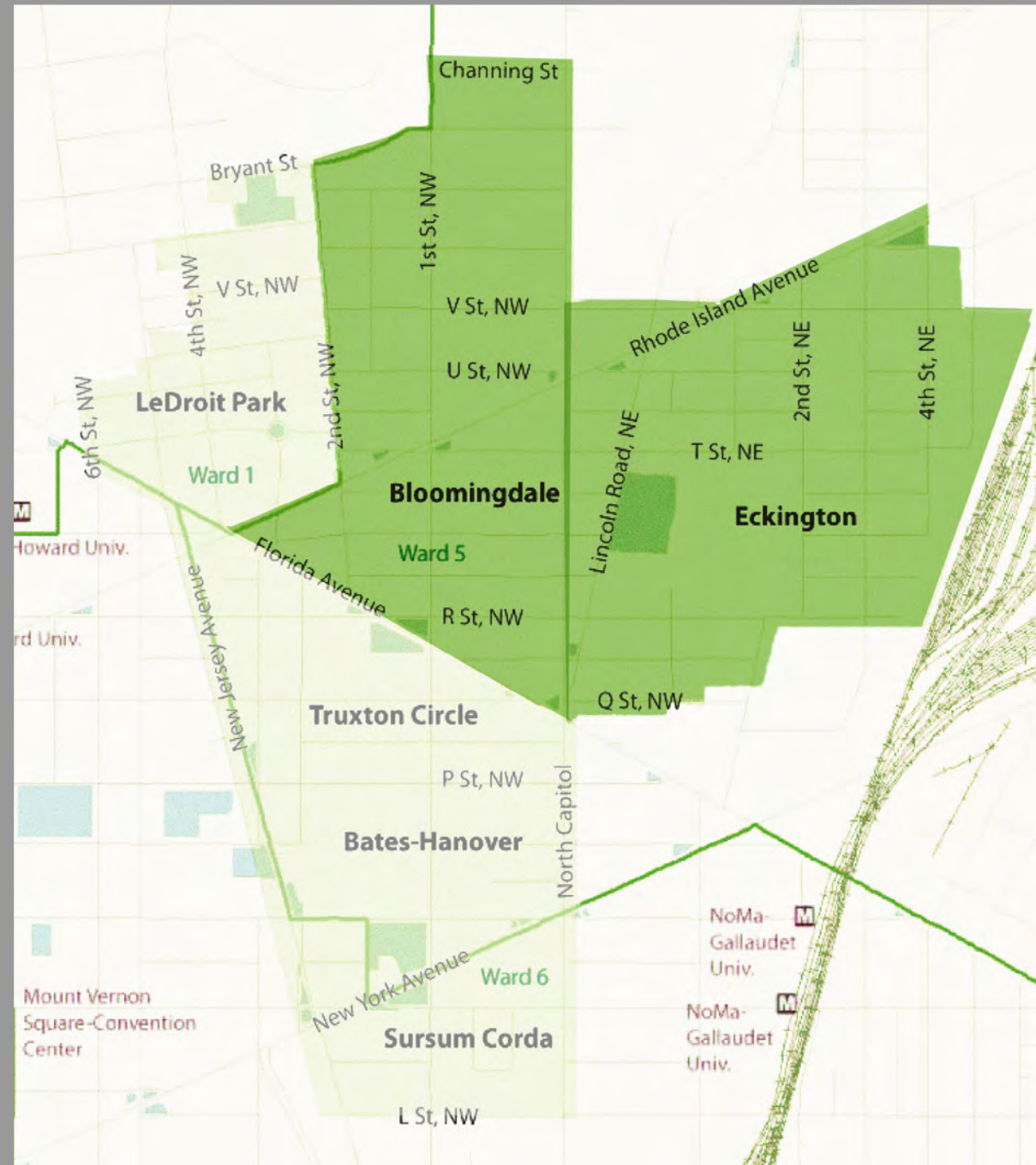
- ✦ DC Office of Planning led a community-based planning process from April 2013 to December 2013
- ✦ Currently in draft form, expected to be adopted by Council in early 2014
- ✦ Framework for conservation, development, sustainability and connectivity
- ✦ Recommends exploring options for historic district or pilot conservation district designation for the neighborhoods of Eckington and Bloomingdale



Overview

Bloomingdale and Eckington

- ✦ Distinct neighborhoods divided by North Capitol Street
- ✦ Developed as row house neighborhoods at the turn of the 20th Century.
- ✦ Struggling to balance growth with the conservation of community character



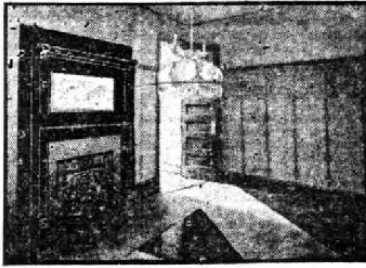
Context

- ✦ Diverse historic resources including residential, commercial, institutional, and industrial properties
- ✦ Dating primarily from the 1870s to the 1930s
- ✦ Strong connections to city history
- ✦ Period of decline
- ✦ Major changes in past decade


BEST BUY IN BLOOMINGDALE



PRICE
\$5,250
2 SOLD

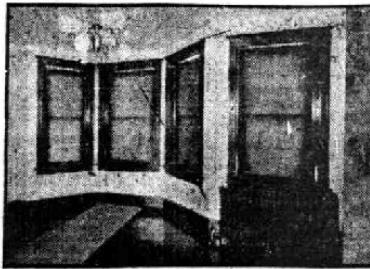


Not a Box
But a House

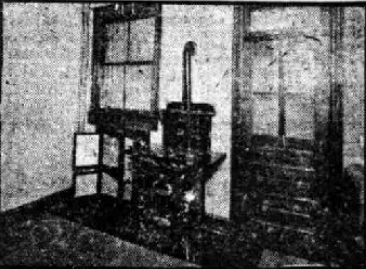


26 to 38
Adams St.
N. W.

Take
North
Capitol
Street
Car
Line



W. C. BLUNDON
OWNER
and
BUILDER



HARRY V. BOUIC & CO.
EXCLUSIVE AGENTS
Southern Building Phone M. 1615

Context

Planning Context

✦ DC Comprehensive Plan, 2006 (2011)

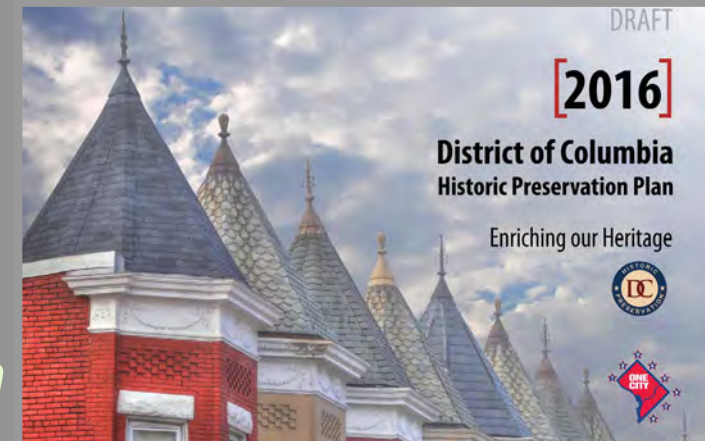
Consider the designation of Columbia Heights, Eckington, Bloomingdale, and other Mid-City neighborhoods as “Conservation Districts.”

✦ DC Historic Preservation Plan, 2013

Be open to new possibilities and new approaches, including tools beyond historic district designation

✦ Mid City East Small Area Plan, 2013

Explore options for designating Bloomingdale and/or Eckington as an historic district or a pilot



Analysis

Assets

- ✦ Strong neighborhood identity and sense of place
- ✦ Cohesive blocks of well-built row houses, lively roof line, varied streetscape
- ✦ Variety of housing types, including small historic apartment buildings
- ✦ Historic commercial corridor
- ✦ Compatible coexistence with historic industrial area
- ✦ 3 historic landmarks; 21 potential
- ✦ High degree of integrity



Analysis

Threats

- ✦ Pop ups
- ✦ Excessive/incompatible rear additions
- ✦ Other inappropriate additions
- ✦ Demolition and teardown
- ✦ Incompatible new development
- ✦ Escalating values and loss of affordability
- ✦ Loss of fabric that supports diversity



Analysis

Pop Ups

- ✦ Additions of one or more stories to existing buildings
- ✦ Constructed by speculative developers
- ✦ Negatively impacts the architectural character of the neighborhood



Analysis

Pop Ups

Historically and aesthetically insensitive additions

- ✦ Destroy character-defining elements such as turrets
- ✦ Disrupt the consistency of the roofline
- ✦ Damage the overall integrity of the block



Current Tools

Historic District Designation

- ✦ DC's Historic District Protection Act of 1978
- ✦ 28 neighborhood-based historic districts
- ✦ Eligibility determined by National Register Criteria
- ✦ **Review required** for most exterior alterations, repairs and replacements; new construction; demolition; subdivision
- ✦ **Benefits include:** limited grant and tax incentive eligibility, insulation from extreme market fluctuations, the stabilization of residential patterns and increased connections among neighbors and higher rates of community participation owners



Current Tools

Opposition to Historic District Designation

- ✦ Philosophical and economic misgivings, in addition to popular property rights concerns.
- ✦ Increase the cost of maintenance and minor additions
- ✦ Unnecessarily restrict growth
- ✦ Escalate gentrification and displacement
- ✦ Multiple failed efforts to create Historic Districts in neighborhoods such as Lanier Heights, Brookland, Chevy Chase, and Barney Circle.

Plan for Lanier Heights Historic District Met With Opposition, Complaints

By Anthony L. Harvey

Chaos, conflict, and candor — or the lack thereof — all threatened disruptions when over 100 Adams Morgan residents

**NO
HISTORIC
DISTRICT**

It's OUR neighborhood.
Have your say.

WWW.LANIERCITIZENSASSOCIATION.COM

PRESERVATION

Chevy Chase won't be a historic district

by [David Alpert](#) • October 21, 2008 10:44 am

Historic Chevy Chase DC, the organization advocating a historic district in Chevy Chase, plans to respect the results and not apply for historic designation. From their

Current Tools

Other tools

- ✦ Historic Landmark Designation
- ✦ Multiple Property Designation
- ✦ Grant Programs
- ✦ Heritage Tourism



Conservation District Precedents

Conservation Districts

- ✦ Increasingly popular tool for preserving the character of established residential neighborhoods.
- ✦ Not supported by D.C.'s historic preservation ordinance, however steps are being taken to revise the ordinance
- ✦ Referred to as a "Historic district-lite"
- ✦ Similar to, but more lenient than, historic district design guidelines
- ✦ Design guidelines focus on regulating consistent massing, height, setback, and orientation that unify the neighborhood and contribute to the character

Cambridge, MA
Nashville, TN
Philadelphia, PA
Indianapolis, IN

Conservation District Precedents

Cambridge, MA

Protection for neighborhoods with

Merit but do not qualify for historic district status

Requirements

Distinctive character

Review Required for

Construction
Demolition
Exterior alteration except color

Administration

Neighborhood Commissions

Review Process

HC staff issues Certificates of Non-Applicability, or forwards to the Neighborhood Commission for a public hearing before issuing a COA



Conservation District Precedents

Cambridge, MA

Protection for neighborhoods with

Requirements

Review Required for

Administration

Review Process

Merit but do not qualify for historic district status

Distinctive character

Construction
Demolition
Exterior alteration except color

Neighborhood Commissions

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Conservation District Precedents

Nashville, TN

Protection for neighborhoods with

Insufficient support for historic district levels of review

Requirements

National Register criteria

Review Required for

Demolition
New construction
Additions
Relocations

Administration

Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission

Review Process

HC staff approves plans or forwards to MHZC for public hearing



Conservation District Precedents

Nashville, TN

Protection for neighborhoods with

Requirements

Review Required for

Administration

Review Process

Insufficient support for historic district levels of review

National Register criteria

Demolition
New construction
Additions
Relocations

Metropolitan Historic Zoning Commission

HC staff approves plans or forwards to MHZC for public hearing



Conservation District Precedents

Indianapolis, IN

Protection for neighborhoods with

Merit but do not qualify for historic district status

Requirements

Historic association and a strong sense of time and place

Review Required for

Construction
Demolition
Additions
Most roof and front facade alterations
Relocation

Administration

Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission

Review Process

HPC staff issues administrative COA, sends to a hearing officer, or forwards to the IHPC for hearing



Conservation District Precedents

Indianapolis, IN

Protection for neighborhoods with

Requirements

Review Required for

Administration

Review Process

Merit but do not qualify for historic district status

Historic association and a strong sense of time and place

Construction
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Additions
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Indianapolis Historic Preservation Commission

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Conservation District Precedents

Philadelphia, PA

Protection for neighborhoods with

Insufficient support for historic district levels of review

Requirements

Consistent physical character

Review Required for

Exterior alterations visible from public way
Demolition
New construction
Use of vacant lot

Administration

Planning department; administrative review only

Review Process

Planning department staff issues Certificates of Compliance, with conditions if warranted



Conservation District Precedents

Philadelphia, PA

Protection for neighborhoods with

Insufficient support for historic district levels of review

Requirements

Consistent physical character

Review Required for

Exterior alterations visible from public way
Demolition
New construction
Use of vacant lot

Administration

Planning department; administrative review only

Review Process

Planning department staff issues Certificates of Compliance, with conditions if warranted



Conservation District Precedents

Summary

Cambridge

Nashville

Indianapolis

Philadelphia

Protection for neighborhoods with

Requirements

Review Required for

Administration

Review Process

Recommendations

Conservation District Draft Ordinance

★ Draft version of the
Historic Preservation Act of 2014

★ Revision to Historic
Preservation Act of 1978

★ Gives Conservation District
“equal status”

Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978

(D.C. Law 2-144, as amended through April 7, 2012) or the

Historic Preservation Act of 2014

Note: This unofficial version is for the convenience of the user, and is not intended to substitute for the D.C. Official Code

AN ACT

IN THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

To provide protection for historic landmarks, historic districts, and **conservation districts** in the District of Columbia

BE IT ENACTED BY THE COUNCIL OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA,

That this act may be cited as the *Historic Landmark and Historic District Protection Act of 1978, as amended, or the Historic Preservation Act of 2014.*

Section 2. Purposes. (D.C. Official Code § 6-1101)

(a) It is hereby declared as a matter of public policy that the protection, enhancement and perpetuation of properties of historical, cultural and aesthetic merit are in the interests of the health, prosperity and welfare of the people of the District of Columbia. Therefore, this act is intended to:

- (1) Effect and accomplish the protection, enhancement and perpetuation of improvements and landscape features of landmarks and districts which represent distinctive elements of the city's cultural, social, economic, political and architectural history;
- (2) Safeguard the city's historic, aesthetic and cultural heritage, as embodied and reflected in such landmarks and districts;
- (3) Foster civic pride in the accomplishments of the past;
- (4) Protect and enhance the city's attraction to visitors and the support and stimulus to the economy thereby provided; and
- (5) Promote the use of landmarks, historic districts, and **conservation districts** for the education, pleasure and welfare of the people of the District of Columbia.

(b) It is further declared that the purposes of this act are:

- (1) With respect to properties in historic districts:
 - (A) To retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the historic district and to encourage their adaptation for current use;
 - (B) To assure that alterations of existing structures are compatible with the character of the historic district; and
 - (C) To assure that new construction and subdivision of lots in an historic district are compatible with the character of the historic district;
- (2) With respect to historic landmarks:
 - (A) To retain and enhance historic landmarks in the District of Columbia and to encourage their adaptation for current use; and
 - (B) To encourage the restoration of historic landmarks.
- (3) With respect to archaeological sites designated as historic landmarks or contributing properties within historic districts:
 - (A) To protect historic and prehistoric archaeological sites from irreparable loss or destruction; and
 - (B) To encourage the retrieval of archaeological information and artifacts when the destruction of an archaeological site is necessary in the public interest.

(Note: Paragraph 3 was added by D.C. Law 16-185 on November 16, 2006)
- (4) With respect to properties in conservation districts:
 - (A) To retain and enhance those properties which contribute to the character of the conservation district and to encourage their adaptation for current use;
 - (B) To assure that major additions to existing structures are compatible with the character of the conservation district; and
 - (C) To assure that new construction in a conservation district is compatible with the character of the conservation district.

Section 3. Definitions. (D.C. Official Code § 6-1102)

Recommendations

Conservation District Draft Ordinance

Protection for neighborhoods with

Insufficient support for historic district levels of review

Requirements

National Register criteria

Review Required for

Demolition
New construction
Major Additions

Administration

Historic Preservation Review Board

Review Process

HPO staff approves plans or forwards to HPRB for public hearing



Recommendations

Conservation District Draft Ordinance

The proposed amendment defines “major additions” as:

... [the] expansion of an existing building or structure that:

- (A) **increases the height** of the building or structure;
- (B) **adds to the front** of the building or structure;
- (C) increases the **gross floor area** of the building or structure by 500 square feet or more; or
- (D) increases the **footprint** of the building or structure by 250 square feet or more.

Recommendations

Assessment of Draft Ordinance

- ✦ Builds on a system already in place
- ✦ Use of familiar standards
- ✦ Clearly differentiation with a lower level of regulation and review
- ✦ Allow for compatible growth
- ✦ Addresses public demand



Recommendations

Challenges

- ✦ Public presentation and public education campaign
- ✦ System to allow a conservation district to become historic district
- ✦ Draft major addition design guidelines



Recommendations

Additional Recommendations

- ✦ Revise demolition ordinance, strengthen penalties
- ✦ Prepare MPD form for Eckington Industrial area



Conclusion

Darcy Buckley
December 17, 2013

