

LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT CERTIFICATION POLICY, GUIDELINES, AND CHECKLIST

The Historic District Act (“HDA”)(53 P.S. § 8001, et. seq.) is the enabling law that allows Pennsylvania municipalities (excluding cities of the first and second class) to designate historic districts and manage changes to the properties within those districts through a historic preservation ordinance. The HDA requires the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) to certify the boundaries of local historic districts before a municipality may begin implementing and enforcing the ordinance and related review processes. The certification process is managed by the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office (PA SHPO), a bureau of the PHMC. PHMC’s certification is the last step in the process of establishing a historic district, which means that the municipality must have gone through the public engagement and normal legislative process for the ordinance before submitting a certification request.

Certification Policy

The PHMC has adopted the following policy for certification of local historic districts under the HDA.

1. Certification Request

- a. Prior to requesting certification of a historic district, the municipality may consult with the PA SHPO (Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office) regarding the proposed ordinance and district boundary.
- b. Following adoption of the ordinance establishing the historic district, the chief elected official of the municipality shall request certification in writing and submit the following information to PHMC for consideration:
 - i. documentation of the district’s boundaries and current physical condition in a form and manner as specified by the PA SHPO;
 - ii. a copy of the municipality’s adopted historic preservation ordinance, including designation criteria, and any adopted ordinances or amendments related to the boundaries of the district under consideration;
 - iii. an explanation of how the proposed district qualifies as historically significant according to the municipality’s own ordinance and criteria;
 - iv. an explanation of how the proposed district falls within PHMC’s policy’s definition of historic district; and
 - v. sufficient documentation to support the certification request and the municipality’s own designation criteria.
- c. PHMC, through the PA SHPO, may request additional information before rendering a decision regarding certification.

2. Definition of Historic District: A historic district is an area that possesses a sufficient concentration, linkage, or continuity of buildings, structures, sites, objects, or open spaces united historically by plan or physical development.

- a. A district may comprise both distinctive features and features that lack individual distinction.
- b. A district may contain buildings, structures, sites, objects, or open spaces that do not necessarily contribute to the significance of the district.
- c. A district may include areas that act as a visual buffer to protect the character and significance of the historic district.

3. Criteria for Certification: In determining whether to certify the proposed historic district, PHMC will consider the following:

- a. Whether the proposed historic district meets the definition of an historic district as defined in this policy;
- b. Whether the municipality’s ordinance creating the district falls within the municipality’s own criteria for determining the historical, architectural, or cultural significance of a historic district; and
- c. Whether the municipality has provided sufficient documentation and justification applying its designation criteria.

To apply for historic district certification under the Historic District Act, please submit the Certification Checklist with accompanying materials to the Pennsylvania State Historic Preservation Office (PA SHPO) at least 45 calendar days prior to the next regularly scheduled meeting of the PHMC; meetings are generally held in March, June, September, and December.

NOTE: The PA SHPO interprets the Historic District Act to require boundary certification only when 1) a municipality is designating a new historic district or 2) is expanding or altering the boundaries of a previously certified district to include properties not included in the previously certified area. PHMC certification is not required if the municipality is reducing or altering the district boundaries within the previously certified area.

To help ensure that the historic district boundaries and related ordinances are consistent with the Historic District Act, PHMC policies and guidance, as well as relevant best practices, PA SHPO recommends municipalities follow these steps when developing a historic preservation ordinance:

1. Form a study committee or task force that includes diverse residents, business, and property owners from the area under consideration, municipal staff, one or more members of the local planning commission, a member of the governing body, and representatives from relevant community organizations. The committee/task force should consult with PA SHPO, identify potential district boundaries, facilitate public engagement, draft the ordinance, and gather materials required for PHMC boundary certification.
2. Consult with the PA SHPO Community Preservation Coordinator for your region early in the process to discuss the community's preservation goals and capacity as well as the process for drafting, adopting, and implementing a preservation ordinance. Arrange a site visit with the Coordinator to review the boundaries of the proposed district before drafting ordinances or advertising proposed legislation. Continue consultation with the Coordinator throughout the process of developing and adopting the ordinance and seek feedback on draft legislation and certification materials before formal consideration by the governing body.
3. Follow PA SHPO guidance for historic preservation ordinances and effective practices for local preservation programs in Pennsylvania when drafting the preservation ordinance.
4. Provide meaningful opportunities for public engagement throughout the process of developing the preservation ordinance. Share information with stakeholders and solicit input at key decision points in the process to avoid the spread of misinformation and surprises.
5. Follow appropriate municipal procedures to consider and adopt the historic preservation ordinance, including holding a public hearing to allow for public comment on the proposed ordinance.
6. Following adoption of the ordinance, submit the Local Historic District Certification Checklist and accompanying materials to the PA SHPO at least 45 calendar days prior to a regular PHMC meeting. All certification documentation should be submitted electronically to the Community Preservation Coordinator for your region.

PHMC meeting dates and Community Preservation Coordinator information is available on the PHMC website at <http://phmc.pa.gov>.

LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT CERTIFICATION CHECKLIST

Please submit a completed and signed copy of this checklist along with all supporting materials ***via email*** to the PA SHPO Community Preservation Coordinator for your region at least 45 calendar days prior to a regularly scheduled PHMC meeting. A map of the PA SHPO Community Planning Regions and a schedule of PHMC meetings is available on the PA SHPO website. If the municipality is seeking certification of multiple districts, please submit a separate checklist for each district.

Following receipt of the certification request and supporting materials, PA SHPO staff will review the documentation and prepare a staff report for the PHMC. The Community Coordinator for your region may contact you for additional information or clarification during that review period.

Municipality _____ **County** _____

Municipality Type Township Borough City

Historic District Name _____

New designation Expansion of previously certified boundary

Municipal staff contact _____ **Title** _____

Contact email _____ **Contact phone** _____

Chief Elected Official _____ **Title** _____

Street _____

City _____ **State** _____ **Zip** _____

This local historic district certification request has been prepared and submitted by:

Name

Position/Title

Date

Please see the reverse

Municipality _____
Historic District Name _____

County _____

- A new or updated Pennsylvania Historic Resource Survey Form (HRSF) for the proposed district.**
 - Physical Description – describe the physical characteristics of the district and its resources. Include information about the district’s overall layout, form, and development patterns as well as descriptions of architectural styles, materials, and construction methods that characterize the district. Describe how the area meets the definition of a local historic district in the PHMC Local Historic District Certification Policy.
 - Historical Narrative – briefly describe the history of the district, including key events, patterns persons, that make the district significant.
 - Evaluation – describe how the district meets the designation criteria in the municipality’s historic preservation ordinance. Include a clear and concise statement of significance that relates to the designation criteria.
 - Boundary Justification – describe how the designation of the district relates to the municipality’s comprehensive or preservation plan

- A parcel map clearly showing the boundaries of the proposed district.** The map must include the name of the proposed district, street names, north arrow, and date. GIS shapefiles of the district boundary and underlying parcels are also appreciated, if available.

- Current photographs of the district's streetscapes, capturing primary and secondary facades of buildings as well as significant outbuildings and secondary buildings.** The number of images necessary will vary depending upon the size of the proposed district; include an appropriate number of images that comprehensively represents the district as it appears today. The photographs must be keyed to a separate parcel map with the direction of the camera's view indicated. Photographs should be inserted into the narrative portions of the HRSF or inserted into an 8 1/2" x 11" word processing document with no more than 2 photos per page. Please label each page with the name of the proposed district, county, municipality, and each photo with the photo number as it appears on the parcel map along with a caption.

- An inventory or list of the properties within the designated district.** The inventory must at a minimum include: the address and street name, and construction date of each property. The PA SHPO recommends that the inventory include additional property-level information that will be useful in administration of the ordinance and can provide guidance on gathering that information.

- A copy of the adopted historic preservation ordinance including a parcel map and boundary description.**

- A copy of the applicable sections of the municipality's comprehensive plan that addresses historic resources and historic preservation or the municipality’s historic preservation plan.**

- A letter addressed to **Andrea MacDonald, Director, State Historic Preservation Office** signed by the chief elected official of the local government/municipality requesting that the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission certify the historical significance of the proposed historic district.

All certification information should be sent electronically to the Community Preservation Coordinator for your region. The PHMC will review all submitted materials at a regularly scheduled meeting, and PA SHPO staff will notify the local government of the Commission’s official action. The historic district ordinance may not be enforced until the historic district is certified by resolution of the PHMC.