



Heritage Commissions, Historic Districts and Historical Societies

Heritage Commissions

A Heritage Commission is a town-appointed board/commission composed of citizens who assist the town in protecting, preserving and promoting cultural and historic resources town-wide. Heritage commissions are forward-looking, considering the past in planning for the future.

- A part of municipal government, like a conservation commission or agricultural commission
- Established by town vote
- Primary duties are to advise and assist the planning board and other local boards and commissions, to undertake preservation planning initiatives such as historic resource inventories or a master plan chapter, and to work collaboratively to promote preservation of community character.
- May accept and expend funds for a non-lapsing heritage fund (contributions are tax-deductible)
- May acquire and/or manage historic property and property rights on behalf of the town, subject to approval of selectmen
- Powers and duties set by RSA 674:44-b; each individual municipality determines its own priorities.

There are now 63 heritage commissions in NH.

Historic Districts (Two types)

1) Locally Designated Historic District

A locally designated historic district is a zoning district (usually an overlay) created at the municipal level and administered by a commission made up of local citizens. Historic District Commissions are land-use boards that review proposals for changes such as exterior alterations, new construction and demolition on properties within the district, using a set of review criteria developed by the commission, approved by the community, and applied in a consistent and fair manner to support the goals of the district.

A property-owner's plans must meet with the approval of the historic district commission before construction can begin.

2) National Register Historic District

A National Register district is initiated at the local level for ultimate approval by both the state and federal government. Such districts are strictly honorary, and impose no review or restrictions on the use or alterations to properties in the district--unless state or federal funds, permits or licenses are involved. Then a consulting review process called Section 106 must be followed, which aims to eliminate, minimize, or mitigate adverse effects to historic resources brought about by the federally funded, licensed, or permitted action.

There are currently 47 historic district commission in NH

Historical Societies

With only a few exceptions, most local historical societies are private non-profit organizations that are accountable only to themselves. They have a board of directors and dues-paying members. Typically, they collect artifacts from the past and display and store them in historic buildings that are open to the public, for a fee, on a limited basis.

- They operate primarily on membership contributions and private fund-raising.
- Only a few in NH have paid staff; all are dependent on volunteers.
- In some cases the municipality subsidizes them by providing a historic building for their use at little or no cost.
- They generally offer museum tours and public programming such as lectures.
- Historical societies accept gifts of artifacts including manuscripts and photographs that pertain to the history of the town or locale.
- Many are struggling to maintain or increase membership, attract visitors, and care for the historic buildings they own or manage.

There are about 200 historical societies in NH plus many private museums.