

Houston Heights Historic Districts Design Guidelines

Community Meeting #2

January 14, 2016

Steph McDougal, project manager

Meeting Summary

The second public meeting for the Houston Heights Historic Districts design guidelines project was held on Thursday, January 14, 2016, in the Parish Hall of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church at 1819 Heights Boulevard. All of the community meetings for this project will be held in this location, which is centrally located within the Heights, with ample parking and an accessible elevator to the second-floor meeting room.

The meeting was publicized through the City of Houston Planning and Development Department website, CitizensNet, and an email message to an existing mailing list of Heights property owners. A letter mailed to all property owners in the three Houston Heights historic districts included information about the meeting, as well as all future meeting dates, and encouraged people to attend.

The meeting was scheduled from 5:30-7:30 p.m. and was divided into two parts: a presentation by project manager Steph McDougal and a period for participants to share their feedback. The presentation portion began at 5:35 p.m., to accommodate latecomers, and lasted for about 40 minutes. This was followed by approximately 50 minutes of questions and answers, at which time the organized portion of the meeting concluded, and participants were encouraged to share their feedback. Many people provided input in writing, while others spoke directly to the Planning staff in attendance. Everyone departed by 7:45 p.m.

Forty-five people attended the meeting (exclusive of Planning staff). All three Houston Heights historic districts were represented.

- Houston Heights East (17 attendees)
- Houston Heights West (7 attendees)
- Houston Heights South (18 attendees)
- Builders, architects, or Realtors who are not historic district property owners (3)
- Others who are not historic district property owners (1)

District	# Properties	% of All 3 Districts	# Attendees	% of All Attendees
Heights East	778	38%	17	27%
Heights West	517	25%	7	12%
Heights South	770	37%	18	32%

Thirteen people who attended the first meeting also attended this meeting; the other 32 attendees were new participants in this process.

In addition to a new handout explaining *context areas* and paper copies of the January project newsletter, all handouts from the previous meeting were provided at this meeting. These included a map of all 22 locally designated historic districts in the City of Houston, a summary of the 2015 amendments to the historic preservation ordinance, and a flowchart explaining the Certificate of Appropriateness application process.

Presentation

This meeting's presentation included an update on project status and, in particular, the evaluation of proposals (which were due earlier that day); answers to questions asked about public works issues during the previous meeting; and a discussion of the opportunities specifically referenced in the historic preservation ordinance where design guidelines may diverge from the standards otherwise included in the ordinance.

Project Status Update

This was the second of three community meetings to be held before the design guidelines consulting team is hired. Anecdotal information gathered from all three meetings will be used to identify major areas of interest/concern; an online survey in March will measure the extent to which those concerns are representative of the larger community. All of that data will be presented at the April meeting.

Request for Proposals

A Request for Proposals (RFP) was published at the end of November 2015, soliciting proposals for a consulting firm or team to develop the design guidelines. All proposals were due on January 14, 2016. At the time of the meeting that evening, the Planning team did not know how many proposals had been submitted.

An RFP Evaluation Committee will review the proposals, interview prospective vendors, and may select a top-ranked proposer and make an evaluation recommendation. Members of the committee include:

- Steph McDougal (design guidelines project manager, City of Houston)
- Margaret Wallace-Brown (deputy planning director, City of Houston)
- Diana DuCroz (historic preservation officer, City of Houston)
- Rob Hellyer (member, Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission; builder)
- Anna Mod (member, Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission; preservation professional)
- Jonathan Smulian (architect and urban planner; developed 2008 design guide for Houston Heights historic districts)

Ms. McDougal noted that a member of the community has asked if the public will be able to review the proposals, and that is not possible. All proposals contain proprietary information submitted confidentially by the vendors; City policy requires the RFP Evaluation Committee to sign non-disclosure agreements before receiving copies of the proposals.

The RFP Evaluation Committee will meet multiple times to score and discuss the proposals received. The Committee will follow the process established by the City Procurement Office and will base its evaluations on the criteria published in the Request for Proposals. Citizens may view the Request for Proposals on the project webpage at http://purchasing.houstontx.gov/Bid_Display.aspx?id=T25601.

Advisory/Steering Committee

An Advisory or Steering Committee will be convened to serve as a sounding board for the consulting team during the early-concept stage of the design guidelines development, and to provide feedback in a timely manner, should the consulting team have specific questions that require community input. The advisory/steering committee will meet about once a month between April and November 2016.

The committee will include 12 people: three property owners from each of the three historic districts, plus three building/design professionals. [On Monday, January 19, the board of directors of the Houston Heights Association agreed that Bill Pellerin, its land use committee chair, can serve as a 13th member of the advisory/steering committee.] Ms. McDougal noted that she would attempt to seat a committee that includes individuals with a variety of experiences with the Certificate of Appropriateness (COA) process, including some whose experience was positive, others whose experience was not positive, and those who have never applied for a COA. She will also try to include people with different types of property, length of time in the district, etc. Ms. McDougal stated that this may require recruiting individuals other than those who have volunteered. Ms. McDougal encouraged anyone who is interested in serving on the committee, or who would like to nominate someone to serve, to contact her via phone or email, before the end of January.

Public Works Questions

Ms. McDougal provided answers to a number of public works-related questions that were asked during the first community meeting. She noted that, although these are outside the scope of the design guidelines project, if people have questions about things in the historic districts, she will try to track down and report the answers, so that everyone may benefit from that information.

Q. How do I report that a street sign on my street does not say “historic district” like the rest of our street signs?

A: Call 311 and let them know that the City needs to replace an existing standard street sign with a historic street sign at that intersection.

Q. Is there a way to prevent construction workers who are working on my street from parking in front of my house every day and taking up all of the street parking?

A: No, parking in the right of way cannot be controlled or restricted.

Q. Can the speed limit be lowered in the historic district to prevent speeding and running stoplights and stop signs?

A: State law in Texas establishes a minimum speed limit of 30 mph unless posted otherwise. A lower speed limit requires other criteria to be met; City of Houston managing engineer Richard Smith advised that the Heights would not meet those criteria. Neighborhoods interested in traffic calming options, such as speed cushions (a rubber alternative to asphalt speed humps), as an alternative to lower speed limits may contact Gary Draybek with the City of Houston’s

Neighborhood Traffic Management Program (NTMP). Becoming part of the NTMP requires traffic studies, consensus from the neighbors, and approval by first responders; in addition, speed cushions are not available for major thoroughfares or “collector streets,” and the neighborhood must bear some or all of the cost of the speed cushions, which can be substantial.

Q: Why are sidewalks 3’ wide in some places and 4’ wide in other places? Why does the City allow this to be inconsistent?

A: Historically, sidewalks were narrower than they are today. At some point, many years ago, the standard sidewalk width in the City of Houston was set at 4’; in 2008, this was increased to 5’ for redevelopment and new construction. Several other situations might result in a sidewalk that is less than 4’ or 5’ wide:

- *Starting in 2015, the Sidewalk Panel Replacement Program allows property owners in residential areas to replace an existing narrow sidewalk in-kind, with the same size, if they provide notice of intent.*
- *Property owners (mainly in residential areas) may request a variance on sidewalk width if there is insufficient room between the high bank of the ditch and the property line.*
- *Alternative sidewalk designs or materials (such as decomposed granite) are allowed next to trees, in order to preserve tree health.*
- *Variations in width are allowed where sidewalks must go around poles.*

Ways in which the Community Can Customize Design Guidelines

Several people have asked how the community will be able to customize or have input to the design guidelines. Ms. McDougal reminded attendees that the historic preservation ordinance allows the design guidelines to be more strict (but not more lenient) than the ordinance, but it also includes several instances where the design guidelines may establish different standards.

Context Area

As defined in the 2015 historic preservation ordinance, a *context area* is “the blockface and the opposing blockface within the district where the proposed activity is located. Context area may include a different geographic area if the commission finds that unusual and compelling circumstances exist **or that the context area is described different in design guidelines.**”

Context area is used to determine which properties should be considered in comparisons of compatibility when reviewing Certificates of Appropriateness (COA) for:

- Exterior alterations
- New construction
- Relocation of a contributing structure within the same district
- Administrative approvals for non-contributing structures

The context area may need to be defined differently for specific areas or conditions, such as:

- Properties located on the edge of the historic district, where the opposing blockface is not within the boundaries of the district
- Unusual land uses (e.g., new church or school construction)
- Few or no other Contributing structures on the blockface(s)
- East-West streets vs. North-South streets, or East-West facing lots that were subdivided out of North-South facing lots
- Heights Boulevard

While the consulting firm/team will make recommendations about context areas, it would be helpful for them to have input from the community about the different types of areas or conditions that might affect context area in the Heights. Ms. McDougal asked attendees to begin thinking about:

- What specific areas should the consultants look at?
- What conditions might they need to consider?

For more information about context areas and how they are defined, please refer to the Context Areas handout made available at this meeting and provided at the end of this document.

Exemptions

Some exterior alterations do not require a COA at all; these are called “exemptions.” However, the design guidelines for a specific historic district or districts can require an alteration, which is otherwise listed as an exemption in the ordinance, to have a COA within that historic district. For example, the community might decide that it wants the installation of fences or free-standing signs, which are listed as exemptions from the COA process, to be subject to the regular COA process. The removal of items from the exemption list might be handled differently for specific areas within the historic district; for example, the installation of free-standing signs might be exempt for properties on the more commercial streets (e.g., Heights Blvd., 20th, 11th) but require a COA for properties on streets that are primarily residential.

The community can decide if it wants to remove one or more of the alterations currently listed as exemptions from that list. The consulting team also may make recommendations regarding exemptions.

Administrative Approvals

The historic preservation ordinance contains a list of alterations that require a COA but may be approved by the Planning staff, without going before the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission (HAHC). That process of staff review is called *administrative approval*.

The design guidelines may require that one or more items currently listed as eligible for administrative approval must, instead, go before the HAHC -- for example, if community members decide that they want that type of alteration to be reviewed in a public hearing, so that neighbors have the ability to speak in support of or in opposition to a particular project.

Height of New Construction

The historic preservation ordinance states that “The height of new construction must not be taller than the typical height of existing contributing structures in the context area unless special circumstances ... warrant, except that:

- Design guidelines for an individual historic district may provide that a new construction with two stories may be constructed in a context area with only one-story contributing structures as long as the first story of the new construction has proportions compatible with the contributing structures in the context area, and the second story has similar proportions to the first story; and

This is another area where the community can decide what is best for the historic district.

Questions and Answers

During the question-and-answer period, attendees asked about topics included in the presentation. Other questions included:

Q. How will our comments be provided to the consultants?

A: All comments that are provided in writing will be compiled into a document and provided verbatim, although spelling and punctuation will be corrected to aid in readability, and any personally identifying information will be removed to render the comment anonymous. If comments are provided verbally, we will take notes as best as we can, but we cannot guarantee that those notes will be correct or complete. Therefore, everyone is encouraged to submit their comments in writing.

Q. Has the new mayor vetted this process?

A: Mayor Sylvester Turner was sworn in on January 2, 2016, and has been in office for 12 days. The project team does not have any information about what projects he has reviewed to date. We expect that he will be briefed on this process at some point, but we have no idea when that might take place.

Following the end of the formal portion of the meeting, an attendee asked:

Q. What are the plans for the Post Office?

A: The sale of the Heights Finance Station post office building has been completed. An announcement regarding future plans for the building is expected soon. Note that the eastern half of the property is within the historic district, so any new development must comply with the historic preservation ordinance.

Feedback from the Community

An important part of the meeting involved collecting feedback from attendees, which will be provided to the consulting firm once they are hired. Attendees were asked to answer the following four questions:

- Which parts of the Heights today represent what the Heights should look like 10 years from now?
- What do you want to make sure the consultants know about the Heights?
- What are the benefits of living in a city-designated historic district?
- What responsibilities do property owners have in a city-designated historic district?

Each of four feedback stations consisted of a long table with a poster board containing one of these questions, set up on a table-top easel. Sticky notes, as well as pens and markers, were provided at each station. Most attendees chose to write their answers on sticky notes and post those on the poster boards. A total of 49 sticky notes were submitted; a list of all comments is provided below.

Following the meeting, several people sent email messages to ask questions and convey further feedback. All feedback from the public is being collected and will be published at reasonable intervals, as well as provided to the design guidelines consulting firm.

Question 1. Which parts of the Heights today represent what the Heights should look like 10 years from now?

- The current historic districts; not what has happened at 18th and Ashland (total congestion)
- Any area of the Heights except Cortlandt between White Oak and 12th Street, where the City filled in the ditches and put in curbs and driveways reminiscent of FM 1960 subdivisions.
- Leave it alone! One house, one lot, 50' x 100-145'
- Harvard from 20th to 11th Streets; 19th Street as [an] example of adaptive commercial reuse in the former Main Street project
- The area bounded by 7th Street to the south, 10th Street to the north, Heights Blvd. to the west, and Studemont [Studewood] Street to the east
- Heights Blvd.
- Street car line: the area bounded by West 17th Street to the south, West 19th Street to the north, Heights Blvd. to the east, and Nicholson Street to the west
- The area bounded by Heights Blvd. to the west, 11th Street to the south, Main Street to the east, and 20th Street to the north
- The area bounded by Harvard Street to the west, 11th Street to the south, 18th Street to the north, and Arlington Street to the east
- The blocks between Harvard to the west and Columbia to the east between 19th Street to the north and 12th Street to the south; homogeneous, lots of old restored houses
- Heights Blvd. is the main street; Harvard and Cortlandt Streets, between 11th Street and 20th Street, are great examples of residential

Question 2. What do you want to make sure the consultants know about the Heights?

- Keep it eclectic
- Family oriented; trees, quiet; walking/riding bike spaces; see the sky; sun in my yard; know neighbors; front porches to sit on
- That this is a unique environment that needs to be preserved but at the same time allows for the diverse nature and individuality of the homes!
- That the renovation and construction 1995-2010 (before the historic district) contributed more to the historic feel of the Heights than the camelbacks we have had foisted on us by the district
- Eclectic neighborhood with homes of all styles and sizes. Don't fill in the Heights with a bunch of "typical" homes.
- It is a wonderful, special place where every home is unique – a step back in time.
- Keep it classy, keep it Heights
- It has a great history; keep the deep front porches and keep the character historic
- It has a rich history of contribution to Houston, Texas, and the country. Many well-known people grew up here and contributed to what Houston has become and the future of our country.
- In a city with more square miles than any other, it is completely fair to have a few pockets (of less than 2%) where those of us who love historic architecture can live, work, and play.
- The Heights is unique – don't let it be eroded and turn into another West University Place
- Diversity and continuity must be balanced – The most important element in the Heights is to preserve the scale of the street scene
- Consultants should know that living in the Heights is like living in a small town. Guidelines should be able to take this into account. Need to respect setbacks (side, front, and back) as well as the FAR.

Question 3. What are the benefits of living in a city-designated historic district?

- Design by committee has produced sub-optimal results.
- Improvement in property value; preserving the character of the area; a living history
- Uniqueness; preserving a little bit of history; quality construction
- Safety in property values
- The ability to live amongst a rich tapestry of building style and with a level of craftsmanship seldom seen in "average" homes in this era
- Value of property is maintained; aesthetic is maintained; part of committed community; "small town" feeling
- We recently moved here from the Woodlands, a master-planned community north of the city. I like the fact that the houses are diverse, different colors and historic – keep it special, unique and organic! #HoustonHeights
- Preservation of character. Without the historic districts, the Heights would very soon look like every other part of Houston – bland and boring!

- Security knowing that some degree of certainty is in place; higher property values within the district for comparable properties other than location
- Caché of living in a historic district; great for property values

Question 4. What responsibilities do property owners have in a historic district?

- To not do harm to the existing fabric. Community requires consideration!
- Support responsible investment and development
- To take care of the home; preserve; to take care of the land
- Participate
- Follow the rules and guidelines!! Be proactive; maintain your property in good shape
- Don't be selfish! What we do affects everyone – keep it historic!
- To preserve the properties for the next generation; to maintain and care for them and ensure their survival
- To follow the ordinance and abide by the requirements
- Why would you buy in a historic district if you don't like it? Learn about the history and contributions
- Living in a historic district requires a compromise of personal property rights; if you don't like living in a historic district, you should consider moving out of the district. Understand that there are unique requirements within a historic district.
- To maintain the historic character and contribute to the architectural elegance of the district [neighborhood], which they were doing long before the district [historic district designation] came along
- They should be involved in maintaining their historic residence, and if you want to live in a “bird house”, just go over to the other side of Shepherd and join the masses!

Conclusion

While only about one-third of the individuals who attended this meeting took time to share their answers to the questions at the feedback stations, those who did provide comments were generally in agreement that:

- The variety and eclectic nature of architecture within the Heights is an essential part of the neighborhood's character, and participants want to maintain those unique qualities.
- Heights Boulevard, along with the 21-block area between Heights, Arlington Street, 11th Street, and 20th Street, was identified as the most representative portion of the Heights.
- Attendees identified strong property values and historic character as the main benefits of living in a historic district. They identified several responsibilities that property owners have in a historic district, including taking care of their property and preserving its historic character, following the rules of the district, and being community-minded, because "what we do affects everyone."

Please note that this process can only provide the opportunity for people to give feedback; it does not require property owners to participate. Because this data was collected from a small group, it cannot be extrapolated to represent all residents in the Houston Heights Historic Districts. A survey in March 2016 will help to determine the extent to which these comments are supported by the districts overall.



Historic District Design Guidelines: "Context Area"

What is a Context Area?

As defined in the 2015 historic preservation ordinance, a context area is "the blockface and the opposing blockface within the district where the proposed activity is located. Context area may include a different geographic area if the commission finds that unusual and compelling circumstances exist **or that the context area is described different in design guidelines.**"



This image (left) shows how a context area would be defined in practice. The star represents a proposed project or activity in a historic district. The white line surrounds the context area, as defined in the ordinance.

Blocks are one or more lots, tracts, or parcels of land bounded by streets, easements, rights-of-way, or other physical features (or a combination of these).

The *blockface* where this example is located would be the west side of Rutland, between 14th and 15th Streets. A blockface consists of the portion of the block that abuts the street; in this case, that's the side of the street on which the project is located. The opposite side of the street is called the *opposing blockface*.

Blockfaces do not continue past the end of the block.

How are Context Areas used in the City of Houston historic preservation ordinance, as amended in 2015?

The 2015 historic preservation ordinance refers to *the context area* in a number of places involving Certificates of Appropriateness (COA). A property owner who wants to alter the exterior of a building in a historic district, build an addition, build new construction, relocate a building, or demolish a building, must apply for and receive a COA before doing that work. The COA process enables the City to protect and maintain the historic character of historic districts. When reviewing an application for a COA, the Planning staff and Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission will consider whether the proposed project is compatible with existing buildings *in the context area*.