Community Meeting on Historic Neighborhoods

Organized by West Mt Airy Neighbors (WMAN)
Location: Commodore John Barry Irish Center, 6815 Emlen St
July 31st, 2025

WMAN held a community-wide meeting to share information and hear the community's thoughts about the historic preservation nomination and designation process for Pelham. A panel of experts from across the city were invited to explain the benefits of both local and national historic designation and to answer common questions. Questions from previous meetings were reviewed, and new questions/topics were addressed.

Panel speakers:
Heather Hendrickson, Philadelphia Historical Commission Staff
Jennifer Robinson, Preservation Alliance
Mark Brack, resident of Powelton Village, locally designated as a historic district in 2022
Lisa Kolakowsky Smith, resident of Pelham

The meetings began with a slide show and the panel speaking to various aspects of historic preservation. The slides can be found at
https://wman.net/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/25_0731_WMAN-HPI-Intro-COM-MTG-FIN.pdf

New Questions/Topics :

New construction

- *What was the review process like for a new construction in locally designated Powelton Village? (see slide 21)*
    - It had to go through a review process several times. It was important that it was at a residential scale (there are single family homes all around it). The mansard roof and overhang brought it down scale-wise. The materials were important, as well as the shape of the bays which mimic early 20th century apartment buildings. The style within Powelton Village was specifically what was considered, and a new building in a different historic neighborhood would have its own neighborhood-specific considerations.

Cost

- *How much did the Powelton Village Designation cost?*
    - $45,000 for 900 properties, which the neighborhood raised themselves. Pelham has roughly 300 properties. However, Powelton Village was already a national historic district, so much of the local nomination could be drawn from that.

Current/Potential Developmental Changes in Mt Airy and Pelham

- *We as a neighborhood don't currently have much say in the buildings that are going up.*
    - WMAN does have RCO Zoning meetings to try to influence the direction of new developments. A historic designation would require a more formal review and more consideration of the direct surroundings of the neighborhood.
- Zoning controls certain aspects of development but will not protect against demolition for subdivision and new housing
    - In a review of lot sizes in Pelham (see slide 25), over half of the lot sizes are over 10,000 sq ft, which is the minimum lot size. Currently developers could demolish the buildings on these lots, subdivide them, and build more new construction.

Pelham Boundaries

- See slide 37-38. Lois Frischling outlined a Pelham boundary 40 years ago, and this is what we are generally basing the current nomination on. However, it is not certain and could be altered depending on the research outcomes needed to create the nomination.

Zoning Overlay vs. Historic Designation

- Neighborhood conservation overlays can be accomplished, but it's a blanket, one-size-fits all approach like a prescribed new construction formula. There is no room for modification or property-specific determinations. Conversely historic designated buildings are looked at individually and holistically.
- A zoning change might *discourage* someone from tearing down a building if they can't make a profit, but it doesn't *prevent* it the way local designation does.

Review of Questions/Comments from Previous Meeting:

- Differences between local and national registers
    - It's a common misperception that the national register protects against demolition and unsympathetic changes - it does not. The national register is honorary, but the local designation is what has the demolition protection. The national designation does have tax credits for income producing properties (like rentals). Some states do have tax credits for homeowners, but PA does not for the local designation.
- Solar panels
    - There is no clear answer on whether solar panels will be approved, as each house will be different. Many *do* get approved. Often the configuration of panels may just need to be adjusted, which the Commission can work out with the solar panel company (this just happened in Overbrook Farms, and it turns out the same number of panels were able to be installed).
- What if a property owner decides not to abide by the requirements?
    - The Commission itself does not have an enforcement arm, but L&I is used for that purpose and L&I will issue a violation.
    - Sometimes people will claim that they "didn't know" about the designation or requirements. In Powelton Village, the civic association puts a note in the mailbox when a property is sold.
    - Neighbors are not expected to report violations, but they can via 311.
- Financial hardship if repairs are needed
    - Restoration is not required or obligated upon designation.
    - There is a good amount of flexibility in materials that are approved (for example a slate roof can be replaced with something other than slate). The Commission does approve vinyl replacement windows for areas that are not in the public right of way. Aluminum clad wood can be approved, and they are looking into fiberglass. In general the Commission tries to have a variety of approved materials as options for owners of designated buildings.
    - Philadelphia does not currently have financial assistance specific to historic preservation, but there are general city programs for low income homeowners: https://phdcphila.org/residents-and-landlords/home-repair-and-improvements/
    - The Preservation Alliance can work with homeowners and (lightly) recommend contractors.
- Does historic designation cause gentrification?
    - This is a common myth, but PlaceEconomics has extensive, recent research that shows otherwise (link)

- Historic districts generally have a wider variety of housing types and different price points.
- A Pew study showed that 1/3 of real estate in Philadelphia is owned by corporations, and this is a big factor for gentrification as they build “luxury” apartments (link).
- When a current building gets demolished, often what is built is small apartments spaces with one or two bedrooms…nothing for families.