

Community Meeting on Historic Neighborhoods

Organized by West Mt Airy Neighbors (WMAN)

Location: Commodore John Barry Irish Center, 6815 Emlen St

March 26th, 2026

WMAN held a closing community-wide discussion regarding the pursuit of a historic designation for the Pelham neighborhood. The intent was to answer questions and provide next steps for gauging property owner support for or opposition to the nomination of the Pelham Historic District to the Philadelphia and/or National Registers.

Facilitators:

Lisa Kolakowsky Smith, resident of Pelham; member of WMAN's Historic Preservation Initiative
Jo Winters, Executive Director of WMAN

Experts:

Alex Till, Philadelphia Historical Commission Staff

Jennifer Robinson, Director of Preservation Services at the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia

Karen Arnold, Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC)

Background: There has been interest in Pelham as a historic district for decades, and WMAN's Historic Preservation Initiative has recently revived the effort. WMAN has received a matching grant from PHMC for the research needed to prepare a nomination such as this.

Questions and Comments

How will the mechanics of gauging the neighborhood response work? Carpenter lane did not get flyers, and we're unsure what the boundaries are.

- The response deadline will be extended, and WMAN will mail info to every household so everyone has the information
- The Keystone grant historians did some preliminary research which gives us more confidence in the map with the red line depicting the boundary ([link](#)). Note that the boundary can be smaller or larger depending on the research

Can community input influence the borders?

- It depends on what the research shows and what retains the integrity.

Is this for both the National Register and the Philadelphia Register? Would the proposal be the same for both? Why would you want to have two designations, what's the difference?

- Much of the research could serve both nominations, and WMAN is interested in pursuing both.
- National designation - people think this one means more regulations, but it's actually more like recognition of historic status. No permissions are needed to make alterations. For properties that are income producing (businesses, rentals), they are eligible for a historic tax credit for certain work on the building. There is no protection against demolition.
- Philadelphia designation - has protection against demolition. For work that requires a building permit and a few additional items, you do need the city's review on alterations. (for example, replacement windows, a new roof, an addition). There is no authority over anything on the interior of the building.

If I need a new front door, do I need to come to the Commission to get permission and do I need to use a list of approved contractors?

- You can send an email, you do not need to come in person. 95% of requests are handled by staff in 24-48 hours.
- There is no specified list of contractors.
- A larger project like an addition would need more thorough review, and could take between 6-8 weeks.

Are solar panels allowed?

- Applications for solar panels are reviewed all the time. It is usually encouraged not to have them on a front facing roof, but there hasn't been a project recently where someone has *not* been able to put them on the house.

If a building has a mix of modern and historic elements, do you need to change the modern ones?

- There is no inherent change required, but if you happen to be changing those elements, then they will be reviewed. For a replacement window for example, the Commission would take into account the window location and the history of the house. You might not be able to put in the exact same modern window (especially if it's vinyl), but it doesn't need to be a perfect replication of a historic window (non-wood and clad options can be approved).
- The Commission has jurisdiction over the entire house, but it is more flexible for areas that are not in public sightlines.

Is there any impact on changing a single family home to a multifamily home?

- This is a zoning issue, and the Commission has no jurisdiction over zoning.

Is there technical assistance to owners?

- Yes, the Commission is happy to answer questions at any time about materials, approaches, etc.

Does it increase the value of the home, or does it just cost me more to keep it?

- Values tend to stabilize and go up slightly, but it's hard to pin a concrete causal relationship.
- When it comes to alterations, sometimes the cheapest option will not be approved, but that doesn't mean the most expensive option is required.

Is the Commission able to connect low income homeowners with helpful programs like [URDC \(Urban Resources Development Corporation\)](#) and [PHDC](#)?

- The Commission does not have a direct relationship with these organizations, but wouldn't turn away anyone working with them.
- The Commission will work with people to improve their homes, they are not here to deny basic needs. The financial position of the owner can be considered in the process.
- WMAN does have active partnerships with two assistance organizations.
- *A Pelham neighbor from Quincy St who is an architect shared that they have brought proposals to the Commission before, and can verify that the Commission works with the homeowners very closely.*

Could we individually nominate our own home?

- Yes, anyone can nominate a property and the Commission can always work with a homeowner if they are interested in designating their own home.
- The designation stays with the property, not the homeowner.

A Pelham neighbor from Hortter St with a background in preservation shared a longitudinal study that looks at houses in historic districts vs not in historic districts. Equity generally goes up, and equity has been the primary mechanism for moving people up the economic ladder. The article looked across two major recessions and the foreclosure rate in the historic districts was

50% lower. When it comes to the economic impact of designation, there is a lot more to it than the short term cost of a single project.

- Link to be provided when available

What does it mean that we are going for a “nomination”? Is it just the research?

- We are trying to get the research needed to write a nomination, and ultimately submit the nomination for both the National and Philadelphia designation.

A neighbor from Hortter St notes that we haven’t heard from anyone that doesn’t like being in a historic district, and asks the room if anyone in this neighborhood will be burdened by the designation (around 13 hands raised). They mention there isn’t assistance for middle income homeowners.

Can we get more data like the article mentioned earlier, and how many applications come through, what is the differential in costs, what are the types of repairs?

- We can compile some of this information and send it out.

A neighbor is concerned about decreasing the desirability of the neighborhood and the risk of driving out young families.

A neighbor from Mower St shares that they owned a historically designated house in Penn Knox and has dealt with the Historical Commission. He shared an experience with a roof replacement, where an asphalt roof was approved within a week, and a back porch was also approved quickly.

Zoning 2035 is coming which will change the zoning coming off Germantown Ave. If the neighborhood is designated as historic, will that have any impact on the zoning changes?

- No, zoning is entirely separate from historic designation.

Why is the voting methodology we are using opt out, rather than opt in? What about a simple majority?

- In the absence of any other existing procedure around historic preservation, WMAN has leaned on the methodology used for the National designation. However there has been a lot of feedback on the methodology, and it may not be the right fit for this neighborhood. WMAN will work hard to get everyone’s voices heard, and will explore mailing decision cards and extending the deadline.

What are the ramifications of doing something that would not be approved?

- L&I is the enforcement arm of the city, so it’d be the same as other violations (there could be a fine, and it must be fixed, could eventually result in a lien).