

15 Questions to Consider When a Historic Resource is Threatened

1. Is the local historical commission, historic district commission or preservation commission in your city or town aware of the threatened historic resource?

If not, contact your city or town hall for information on how to reach them. Contact information may be included on the city or town website as well as the date and time for their next meeting.

2. Are there local bylaws or ordinances in place to delay, protect or otherwise provide for an alternative to demolition or loss?

Through the local democratic process, many cities and towns in Massachusetts have established local laws to protect historic resources. These are established by town meeting or city council vote. Examples include local historic districts, demolition delay bylaws and architectural preservation districts. A demolition delay bylaw provides a window of opportunity for another scenario besides demolition but does not permanently protect a building from demolition. Other tools such as a local historic district can permanently prevent a demolition or inappropriate alteration. Some communities have established single building local historic districts during the demolition delay period. Examples are available from the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Another locally established tool is the Community Preservation Act, which can sometimes provide a funding mechanism for preservation. Local laws offer the strongest form of protection for historic resources. Without these local laws, the options are limited to preventing the loss of a building.

3. Has the local historical commission taken a formal position on this?

If there is no local historic district, demolition delay bylaw or other local law that could prevent a demolition, then the preservation strategy is likely advocacy alone. The local historical commission can take a lead role in advocacy by taking a formal position regarding the proposed demolition. The commission can formally state their concern through a vote of the commission. The position of the commission should be included on a letter distributed to local elected officials, other local boards and commissions and the media.

4. Is there a local private nonprofit historic preservation advocacy organization?

In some cases, a local nonprofit education and advocacy organization can take the lead on efforts to save a threatened historic property. Examples of local nonprofit advocacy

organizations are Historic Salem, Inc., the Waterfront Historic Action League in New Bedford, Preservation Worcester, Springfield Preservation Trust, Falmouth Preservation Alliance, Dartmouth Heritage Preservation Trust and the Boston Preservation Alliance. In some communities, the local historical society may be interested in taking on an advocacy role.

5. Is information on this property included on an MHC Inventory form?

From the Massachusetts Historical Commission website, you can research whether our office has any information on this property. Information on historic properties at the Massachusetts Historical Commission is organized onto Inventory forms. There are a variety of forms depending on the type of resource, such as a building, structure, landscape or burial ground. While it is unlikely that inclusion on an inventory form will help to provide any regulatory protection for this property, having this information at hand will greatly help you to advocate locally for saving it.

6. Is the property on the National Register of Historic Places?

It is essential to understand that the National Register of Historic Places is primarily an honorary designation. Listing on the National Register of Historic Places alone cannot prevent a demolition or loss. Nevertheless, a historic resource listed on the National Register of Historic Places has been recognized by the federal government as significant. Therefore, the National Register of Historic Places can be very useful in local advocacy, making it easier to explain why a historic resource should not be demolished. <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcnat/natidx.htm>

7. Is the property eligible for the National Register of Historic Places?

If the property is not listed on the National Register of Historic Places, it may be possible to obtain a Massachusetts Historical Commission National Register eligibility opinion.

Like a listing on the National Register, a property found eligible for the National Register is not protected from demolition. However, like a listing, when a property is found eligible for the National Register by the MHC, it is easier to advocate locally for saving the building. Typically, an up to date inventory form is used by MHC staff to make an eligibility opinion. If there is no inventory form or the form is outdated or incomplete, it may not be possible for MHC staff to complete the evaluation. Often, MHC may need additional information, for example, interior photographs, before being able to offer an opinion of individual eligibility for a property. It is best when a request for a National Register eligibility opinion comes directly from the local historical commission.

8. Is there a state or federal involvement in the proposed project?

Any new construction projects or alterations to existing buildings that require funding, licenses, or permits from any state or federal governmental agencies are reviewed by the Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) for impacts to historic and archaeological properties. It is the nature of the federal or state agency involvement that triggers MHC review, not listing in the National or State Registers of Historic Places. A listing in either register does not necessarily require review and likewise, lack of listing does not eliminate the need for review. For more information, visit <http://www.sec.state.ma.us/mhc/mhcrevcom/revcomidx.htm>

9. Is there a grassroots effort to advocate for this historic property?

Saving a threatened historic resource cannot be accomplished by just one person or by just the local historical commission. A grassroots advocacy campaign is essential.

Grassroots advocacy is perhaps the most overlooked historic preservation tool and it may be the most successful.

10. Are there other local permits or zoning approvals needed?

If there are additional local permits needed, submit comments to the appropriate local boards and make sure supporters of the historic property are at any public meetings. If enough residents express concerns to the planning board, zoning board of appeals, board of selectmen and/or developer, there is a good chance they will listen and consider an alternate approach.

11. Is there a media campaign to alert more people about this loss?

Press coverage, social media and other publicity efforts are essential to broaden the message.

12. Have you contacted a circuit rider at Preservation Massachusetts?

Preservation Massachusetts, the statewide non-profit advocacy organization, has two circuit riders that may be able to assist you with ideas for saving a threatened historic property.

13. Is there an effort to notify local politicians about the potential loss of this historic resource?

Local politicians must hear concerns from their constituents. Citizens, residents and neighborhood groups should call or write to their city council or select board members to express their concerns.

14. Are your outreach efforts civil, positive and based on respecting others?

While it may be challenging at times, maintaining civility, respecting others and seeking out positives are the only path to a successful outcome. Even if derogatory comments are directed at you, maintain your focus.

15. What can you do if you are unsuccessful?

If your efforts to save a historic resource are unsuccessful, keep in mind the following:

Historic preservation is best accomplished as part of a long-term planning process that involves your local historical commission, local elected officials, other city or town hall boards and commissions, residents and other organizations. A comprehensive, proactive and long term historic preservation strategy is by far the most successful. Sometimes, it is a demolition itself that persuades the community that additional efforts are needed to protect the fragile, unique and irreplaceable historic resources of the community.

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