

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS

## 1. Designation Criteria

### Committee Discussions:

There was a general consensus to retain the existing criteria with modifications to address alterations to proposed landmarks, and to allow for the designation of vernacular architecture, especially in East Austin and South Austin. The Committee agreed that the designation criteria should be flexible enough to protect from demolition the more common buildings that represent the lives and history of ordinary people. The Committee discussed the question of historic zoning for just the footprint of the building rather than the entire parcel as is current practice. Committee members also discussed whether reversible alterations should restrict a building from landmark designation.

### Staff Recommendation

Staff recommends tightening the criteria to better ensure that the buildings nominated for landmark designation are truly significant to the history of the city because of their architecture, historical associations, or community value. Staff recommends retention of the existing designation criteria with modifications to stress an emphasis on the significance (historical, architectural, community) of the building, and to add three new provisions:

- a. The period of significance for the contextual evaluation of a landmark must have been at least 50 years ago, in conformance with National Register designation criteria.
- b. Any building located in a local historic district cannot be nominated for its architecture. The architectural character of the building is already protected by the design standards for the local historic district.
- c. No property can have alterations or additions which have significantly compromised its original height, scale, or materials, unless the alteration or addition is at least 50 years old, or the building is being nominated for extraordinary historical, cultural, or community significance.

## 2. Historic District Designation Process

### Committee Discussions:

The Committee addressed public concerns that the process for designating local historic districts in Austin is too burdensome and recommended the establishment of a fund or program to enable neighborhood groups to hire a consultant to perform the survey, research the history of the district, and write the nomination, with a thought that if the city began charging for the inspection of historic landmarks, that money could be used to maintain the consultant fund. Individual committee members recommended lowering the threshold of support required in the historic district nomination from 51% to 41%, establishing conservation districts in addition to local historic districts to better protect large areas of the city, creation of a template for design standards for local historic districts, and establishing greater entitlements for historic landmarks, such as easing site development regulations regarding parking, impervious cover, and setbacks

to allow landmark property owners greater flexibility in developing their property and discouraging demolitions.

#### Staff Recommendation

- a. Change the requirements for owner support to allow the owners of 51% of the property within the district or 51% of the property owners within the district to sign the petition of support for the district, following the San Antonio provision for the designation of historic districts, and to promote greater proportional representation in the creation of historic districts.
- b. Strengthen the protections for contributing properties within National Register Historic Districts with a goal of establishing local historic districts. Staff recommends adoption of standardized advisory design guidelines for all National Register Historic Districts and providing a greater bar to demolition of contributing structures within the district. Many of Austin's National Register Historic Districts have no design guidelines; introducing advisory design guidelines will encourage more sensitive design decisions for contributing properties in National Register Historic Districts. Additionally, the only protection from demolition currently in place for contributing structures in National Register districts is to determine that a threatened building qualifies as a historic landmark. Local historic districts in Austin require a Certificate of Appropriateness for the demolition of a contributing structure; this protection should extend to contributing structures in National Register Districts as well.

Designation as a local historic district would require the adoption of binding design standards by a majority of the owners or the owners of the majority of the land within the district; designation as a local historic district also qualifies property owners within the district to apply for the existing local historic district property tax incentive for the rehabilitation of contributing structures.

- c. Institute a demolition delay on contributing properties within National Register and pending local historic districts for up to 180 days after the date of mailing of notice for the first public hearing on the application for demolition of a contributing property, or the creation of the district at the Historic Landmark Commission. Austin now has a pendency of designation statute to protect individual buildings which are before the Historic Landmark Commission for designation as a historic landmark from demolition; this protection should be extended to contributing buildings within National Register and nominated local historic districts which have been placed on the Historic Landmark Commission agenda for review. Demolition delays exist to protect potential landmarks and nominated historic districts in most of our peer cities.
- d. Staff further recommends exceptions to the demolition delay for dangerous buildings which pose a threat to public health and safety, demonstration of economic hardship, and non-contributing buildings as well as an education process for the public on this provision.

### **3. Modify the tax incentive structure for historic landmarks**

The average City exemption for an owner-occupied homestead is \$2,581. The average exemption for an income-producing property is \$2,763.

#### Committee Discussions:

- a. Adopt and apply the property tax incentive for the rehabilitation of contributing buildings in local historic districts to historic landmarks. Most other cities and states provide a rehabilitation incentive for historic structures. The Committee agrees with the recommendations of the Heritage Society of Austin regarding rehabilitation incentives for individual landmarks and local historic district properties.
- b. Support the process for establishing a cap on owner-occupied homestead landmarks set forth by the Heritage Society of Austin to promote the continued maintenance and preservation of historic buildings. The Committee agreed that the new cap should be phased in over time, either when the property is sold, or stepped down over a period of years, and that the exemption should not have a limited duration. Individual committee members discussed a limited duration for the provision of tax exemptions, from between 5 to 10 years, with existing exemptions expiring in 5 years and any new cases qualifying for the exemption for 7 years.
- c. Request the City Manager to initiate a dialogue with other taxing entities to encourage participation in the property tax exemption program for historic landmarks.

#### Staff Recommendation:

Staff recommends the following changes to the tax incentive structure for historic landmarks:

##### **OWNER-OCCUPIED HOMESTEAD RESIDENCES**

- a. Retain the existing formula for calculating the exemption on all historic landmarks, which is 100% of the value of the structure and 50% of the value of the land for owner-occupied homestead landmarks, and 50% of the value of the structure and 25% of the value of the land for income-producing landmarks OR base the exemption on 60% of the total property value to realize higher savings – the 60% exemption will affect lower-end properties, especially if a cap is also applied.
- b. Institute a cap of \$2,000 as the maximum amount of the tax exemption for all owner-occupied homestead landmarks, to become effective January 1, 2013 to allow the owners of residential landmarks to make necessary modifications to their budgets. Staff recommends that there be no limit on the duration of the capped “maintenance” type of preservation incentive.

Staff also recommends consideration of an alternative philosophy to the provision of the tax exemption to provide a higher cap to older landmarks (over 100 years old), recognizing that the everyday maintenance and preservation of older landmarks generally entails a greater expense than the maintenance and preservation of more recent buildings. Shifting some of the focus of the tax incentive away from pure property value towards the age and maintenance of the building will also benefit more landmarks throughout the city, especially in areas where property values are lower, and may enable smaller preservation projects that would not normally qualify for the proposed rehabilitation property tax incentive. If this approach were adopted, staff recommends a maximum cap of \$2,250 for historic landmarks over 100 years old.

- c. Adopt and apply to historic landmarks the property tax incentive for rehabilitation of contributing buildings within local historic districts to encourage and promote continued rehabilitation projects on historic buildings.
- d. Establish a revolving low-interest loan fund for low-income owners of historic landmarks to more fully participate in the preservation and rehabilitation of their historic homes, with the qualification that they cannot sell or transfer the property for a period of years after completion of the rehabilitation project without financial consequences. This will allow low-income landmark owners to better maintain their properties and will guard against a temptation to get a low-interest loan to restore a house and then “flip” it.

#### INCOME-PRODUCING PROPERTIES

- a. Retain the existing property tax incentives for historic landmarks – 50% of the value of the structure and 25% of the value of the land with no cap. Large downtown buildings are valued at many times the value of the land, so to institute a flat percentage and cap such as that proposed for owner-occupied residential landmarks (where structure and land values are generally more evenly matched up) makes no sense and would work a severe detriment to the preservation of Austin’s most noticeable and important downtown historic buildings.
- b. Institute a rehabilitation property tax incentive identical to that now offered for the qualified rehabilitation of contributing buildings within local historic districts to encourage and promote continued rehabilitation projects on historic buildings.
- c. Establish a revolving low-interest loan fund for façade rehabilitations on historic income-producing buildings in the CBD to encourage better preservation of historic facades and even the restoration or reconstruction of historic facades that have been replaced by modern storefronts.

#### **4. Additional recommendations**

##### Committee Discussions:

- a. Continue the current Code limiting the number of owner-initiated historic zoning cases to no more than 3 per month.
- b. Review applications for historic zoning more stringently to require the applicant to provide a complete application, including all research necessary for the consideration of a historic zoning case.
- c. Require property owners to prove compliance with all permit approval requirements before the Historic Landmark Commission takes action on an application for a Certificate of Appropriateness.
- d. Establish a more thorough inspection process for the annual inspection of historic landmarks.
- e. Establish a fee for landmark property owners to pay for the more thorough inspections of their properties to qualify for the property tax exemption.
- f. Provide a technical and loan assistance program to better enable the rehabilitation of historic structures in South and East Austin.

##### Staff Recommendations:

- a. Establish a fund to provide plaques for every landmark in the City. The plaques currently cost around \$98 each, and many existing landmarks have never received a plaque. Staff believes that every landmark property in the city should be recognized with a plaque, as public awareness and education is one of the primary goals of the historic preservation program. Staff further recommends that the cost of the plaque be included in the application fee for any new historic landmark.