Project – Longmeadow MA Historic District Renovation Request 11/21/19

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The Longmeadow Massachusetts Historic District has been acknowledged by the National Register of Historic Places since 1982. The Longmeadow Historic District (LHD) includes the Longmeadow Green and surrounding areas. Any property owner wishing to renovate, construct or demolish a structure within the LHD must be approved by the Historic District Commission. Following is a description of the current approval process for requesting approval from the Historic District Commission (HDC) and a proposed update and reorganization of the application process to increase efficiency and decrease redundancy.

Property owners wishing to alter any structure on a property within the LHD (renovation, demolition or construction) must complete an application and include pertinent material such as plans, diagrams, drawings, and specifications defined by the Commission. The application process includes a public meeting of the Commission to discuss the details and impact such an alteration would have on the historic district.

The Commission is required to notify all “Abutters” prior to the meeting in which the property is discussed. An “Abutter” is defined as:

All Historic District property owners that are within 100 feet of the applicant’s property (including any adjoining property) or two houses down on either side, whichever is greater.

*The current procedure fits the definition of a business process as it is a chain of required reviews and approvals, none of which can happen without the previous step. The process is initiated by a property owner—of properties within the Longmeadow Historic District—submitting an application to alter their property to the town’s Historic District Commission. Being an iterate process, multiple stakeholders have the ability to impact the outcome, including requiring any edits to the proposed property alterations, within give steps. The result is ultimately either the approval or rejection of the application.*

The current process breaks down or bottlenecks in three primary areas.

1. Hard copy applications are manually passed from one approver to the next, often passing through the HDC Chair’s hands multiple times.
2. The identification of Abutters is the responsibility of the applicant; often resulting in an incorrect and/or incomplete list for notification of the Commission meeting.
3. The hardcopy application’s timestamp is initiated the day the town clerk receives it; regardless of whether it is complete and/or correct..

The existing application process is primarily manual and can be iterative if the applicant has not properly completed the application form or has neglected to include required documentation. It is possible, even likely, that the HDC Chair will review each application multiple times, returning it to the applicant each time to add or correct a required element of the form. On average the chair has to ask an applicant for more information two times per application.

Applicants and property owners are either residents or non-residents.

Submits application:

* Resident applicant - owns and occupies the subject property
* Non-resident applicant - owns the property but does not reside there

Required to be informed of application and public meeting:

* Resident owner - owns and occupies an identified Abutting property
* Non-resident owner - owns but does not occupy an identified Abutting property
* Non-owner residents (ie renters) - may be notified as a member of the general public and according to stipulations of the private lease with the property owner

The identification of Abutters is the most frequent bottleneck in the process. Applicants often do not understand the full definition of an Abutter and will only list one or two of their nearest neighbors. Therefore, the HDC Chair is required to review maps and town records to identify whether all Abutters are in fact listed. If any are missing, the application is returned to the originator, but needs to be reviewed again by the HDC Chair after resubmission.

Once the application is correct, the applicant is added to the agenda of the next appropriate meeting of the HDC. HDC meetings are scheduled monthly and the Commission will review applications received at least 15 days prior to the scheduled meeting. The “15-day clock” begins when the application is received and stamped by the Town Clerk. The timestamp does not change regardless of the completeness or correctness of the application or the number of times it is returned for updates and resubmitted.

Prior to the HDC meeting the application and all related materials must be manually scanned by the HDC Chair to be uploaded to the town website within 14 days of the scheduled meeting. Additionally, the HDC Chair must notify all identified Abutters by mail 10 days prior to the meeting; a process that involves printing and shipping paper letters via US post.

The two most likely outcomes from the HDC meeting:

1. The application may be denied, at which point the applicant may submit an appeal to the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission’s (PVPC) Historical Planner. This is a rare step and only occurs if the applicant believes that the HDC has denied their application for a reason outside their mandate, such as if a HDC member did not properly recuse themselves when voting on an application.
2. The application may be approved, in which case a letter of approval is sent to the applicant, the building commission and the town records and at that point work may proceed as planned.

The new process will increase efficiency in three primary ways:

1. The process will be moved away from a manual paper application to a fully online electronic application.
2. The online system will use the address of the property to be altered to automatically identify the required Abutters.
3. The application will receive a timestamp electronically.

The proposed process will allow applicants to complete all essential forms, including attaching required plans, specs and scope identification. One major improvement will be that incomplete applications will no longer be possible as all pertinent information will be collected in required fields. Meaning the application cannot be submitted until all fields are complete.

Abutter identification now occurs during the submission process. Once the applicant has completed the required forms, the application system will identify and list all appropriate Abutters; appending the list to the application before it reaches the HDC Chair. Thereby removing the uncertainty or confusion of the applicant from the process and minimizing the time required to review and process the application.

The application will receive an electronic timestamp only after the online form as been fully completed. In this way, the “15-day clock” begins only after all required information is received. As the materials will be electronic in nature, time to load the application to the town website will be minimized. As the full list of Abutters will be automatically identified, impacted property owners should receive notification well within the 10 days specified.

Abutter identification is the specific process which will use the database and query procedure. The HDC maintains a database of properties within the historic district, including current owners and registered property line. The application tool will use the applicant’s address and that property’s boundary to automatically search the HDC database and identify impacted Abutters.