

Relay Historic District - Frequently Asked Questions

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1. What is a historic district?

A historic district is a specific geographic area that according to Baltimore County law is “*an area in the county wherein there are located structures which have historical, cultural, educational or architectural value, the preservation of which is deemed to be for the educational, cultural, economic, and general welfare of the inhabitants of the county.*” After the County Council enacts legislation designating an area as a County Historic District, homeowners within the district are expected to maintain their homes to retain the historic character of the neighborhood.

2. How long has Relay been a historic district? How did Relay get to be a historic district?

Relay became a historic district on November 4, 1996 with the passing of Bill 144-96 by the Baltimore County Council. The process to become a historic district actually began in 1991, but didn't get far. In 1995, Kathy Sweet and Marge Fahrenbach picked up the project and asked residents who had signed the petition four years earlier to sign the new petition. They circulated a petition among Relay residents explaining that owners of 75% of the properties had to sign in order for the community to become a historic district.

In August, 1995, letters were mailed to all Relay property owners advising them of a community meeting on September 11, 1995 at the Town Hall, which featured John McGrain, the Baltimore County Landmarks Commission's staff person. Residents were also asked to read the Baltimore County Code for historic preservation in Baltimore County, which was attached to the August 1995 letter (pages 604-616 of the Baltimore County Code were attached). A third meeting was held on February 12, 1996,

featuring Ruth Mascari, the Chairperson of the Landmarks Commission, as speaker.

The Petition was received and discussed in the Landmarks Preservation Commission (**LPC**) meeting on April 11, 1996. The County law then in effect did not require a public hearing or individual notice to owners at that stage of the process. The Commission was knowledgeable about Relay, voted to designate the area as a district, and forwarded the designation to the County Council.

In compliance with the law, the Landmarks Commission then notified each property owner by a letter on July 12, 1996 of the County Council's public hearing scheduled for September 3, 1996 at 8:00 p.m.

According to the Baltimore County website, the owners of eighty-one percent (80.8%) of the area within the proposed Relay district signed the petition and 19.2% did not. We quote now from the website describing the percentages; "*Particip.*" indicates that the owner(s) of the properties signed the Petition requesting designation of the Historic District. "*Not partic.*" indicates that the owner(s) did not sign (and might or might not also have expressed opposition to the District's enactment)."

At the request of Relay property owners who represented 81% of the land acreage, our councilman, Sam Moxley, introduced legislation to the County Council designating Relay a historic district. The bill was passed on November 4, 1996.

3. What are some of the advantages of being a historic district?

Historic district designation helps stabilize older communities, fosters pride in the neighborhood and its historic structures, sparks interest in the local area's history, prevents

incompatible design of infill building, and increases property values. *(Please reference question 13 for additional information.)*

4. What is the Relay Historic District Committee?

The Relay Historic District Committee (RHDC) is a volunteer advisory group to the Landmarks Preservation Commission. When the historic district was ratified by the Baltimore County Council, the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC) requested that we have a local review committee. This is so that the LPC can have the benefit of advice from people who are thoroughly familiar with Relay's particular characteristics.

At this time, the RHDC does not write an opinion letter to be included with the application when it is submitted to the Landmarks Commission. In the past, the opinion letters usually have supported the homeowners' projects as there has been time for discussion and mutually acceptable changes to improve the likelihood of approval by the LPC. Please know that since September 2004, the RHDC has voluntarily refrained from writing any letters of opinion for homeowners who make application.

The RHDC meets at the Town Hall on the second Wednesday of the month at 7:30 p.m. to assist homeowners who are filing an application with the LPC. All RHDC meetings are open to the public.

5. What is the Baltimore County Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC)?

The Landmarks Preservation Commission is the regulating body for historic preservation in Baltimore County. There are 15 volunteer commissioners who serve without

compensation. Seven of the commissioners are appointed by the County Council; the remaining eight are appointed by the County Executive.

The Landmarks Commission meets on the second Thursday of the month, adjusting for legal holidays as needed.

6. How long does it take to go through a review with the local committee and the Baltimore County Landmarks Commission?

The LPC's regular meeting is on the second Thursday evening of each month. To be placed on the Agenda, an applicant must submit 20 copies of page 1 and 2 of the permit application at least two weeks before the meeting. A homeowner has every right just to submit an application to the LPC and hope for the best. If the Commission determines that the application is not complete – that it lacks essential information – the decision may be delayed until the information is provided. Homeowners have generally found, however, that contacting the RHDC early in their project, and getting helpful local guidance, saves time and trips to Towson.

7. Why do we have to go to Towson to go before the Landmarks Preservation Commission (LPC)?

We go to Towson because it is the county seat and it's where the LPC has its office, files, and meetings. People from all over the County come to this central location for the meetings.

Applicants are not *required* to attend the LPC meetings. *If* the application is complete before the meeting, and *if* the proposed work meets the standards, the LPC can and typically does place the application on the Consent Agenda and votes approval without needing to discuss the matter in the public meeting. Homeowners, for example, in Lutherville and Sudbrook Park

work closely with their local committees and usually find their applications quickly approved through the LPC's "Consent Agenda" process. Having a meeting is unavoidable, however, because the law does require that action can be taken *only* by "seven affirmative votes" among the LPC's fifteen members. It simply is not feasible to expect the volunteer Commissioners to attend a variety of meetings at different places around the County every month.

8. What are the Secretary of the Interior standards that I hear mentioned in community meetings?

The standards are known officially as "The Secretary of the Interior Standards for Rehabilitation." When you read the standards, you will see that these are ten guiding principles or standards – not rigid rules – for rehabbing old homes. They are used throughout the nation and have also been adopted by the LPC to guide the Commission's decisions. You can read all the standards at the website:

www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/tax/rhb/stand.htm

If you don't have Internet access at home or work, try the Baltimore County Public Library in Arbutus or Catonsville.

9. Over the years, have the Department of the Interior's standards changed?

The Secretary of the Interior's Standards have been published in several editions beginning in 1977. The changes have been to make the explanations clearer or more complete and to add illustrations. The basic principles of respecting and repairing historic materials have remained the same.

10. Were we ever told in 1996 that if we became a historic district we would need permits to work on the outside of our houses?

Yes, property owners were advised about the exterior work review process in 1996 as part of the discussions with owners when requesting signatures on the Petition.

11. Nobody told me that part of Relay is a historic district when I bought my house. How was I supposed to know that?

Actually, Baltimore County law (Sec. 32-7-107) makes it the *seller's legal responsibility* to disclose *in writing* to the buyer prior to the execution of a contract of sale if a property is located within a historic district. We hope the Relay Historic District signs that have been posted at entrances to the community since 2003 will help future homeowners become aware that Relay is a historic district.

12. What about the tax credits? If I am working on my house, what work is eligible for a tax credit?

Any work that you do to maintain the historic part of a building will qualify for tax credits. Painting, replacing a roof, restoring original windows, renovating an existing bathroom, installing central air conditioning, provided minimal changes are made to the original house, are examples of projects eligible for Maryland Historical tax credits. For help in completing these forms, please contact Theda Mayer or the RHDC.

13. I keep hearing that property values are increased by being in a historic district? Is there any proof for this claim?

There is proof for this claim. A quick search of the Internet shows a number of studies with data that supports the assertion that property values are increased by being in a historic district. Of course, the increased value varies as it is dependent on many factors, particularly location. A sampling of studies noted increased property values in historic districts in Illinois

(1989) by 6-7%, Philadelphia (1994) by 26%, and Sacramento (1997) up to 17%. Closer to home, a Maryland study cited on the Fieldstone community website,

www.fieldstonecommunitygroup.org notes the following:

“A 1999 study of property values in Maryland Historic Districts reported that properties within Historic District boundaries appreciated in value 29% faster than neighboring properties just outside the Historic District.”

A Texas study was referenced in the article, “History Happened Here” by Gerri Hirshey in Parade news magazine (the weekly magazine in The Sunday Sun) on May 8, 2005.

“In Texas, cities with preservation programs have found that historic designations increase property values by 20 percent.” (p. 6)

The Maryland Historic Trust also provides information on current local preservation efforts. They can be found at www.marylandhistoricaltrust.net.

14. Is it possible for individual homeowners to get their homes on the Landmarks list in order to get tax credits? What list would they need to be on, and how many homes in the neighborhood have successfully gotten placed on the State/National Landmarks list?

Yes, homeowners can nominate their individual properties to the Landmarks List, but, that would *not* help at all for tax credits. Being in the Relay County Historic District currently provides automatic eligibility to *apply* for the State program. The key to qualifying for the credits is that the property, besides contributing to Relay’s history, must also, in the State’s opinion, be “eligible for” the National Register of Historic Places. If strictly applied, the latter

standard is very difficult, costly, and time-consuming to meet. Only 50 of the more than 320,000 properties in all of Baltimore County are individually listed on the National Register, although there are National Register Historic Districts covering hundreds more properties.

15. What is a non-contributing structure?

Non-contributing structure simply means a structure does not “contribute” to the characteristics or the period in time that make an area historic. In Relay, it typically means homes that were built after the early twentieth century, especially the ones after World War II. Changes to non-contributing structures should be evaluated only for compatibility with their own era or immediate neighborhood.

16. Why does the Relay Historic District Committee (RHDC) bother with writing community guidelines if the Landmarks Commission doesn’t have to follow our guidelines?

We think we have gathered lots of information that will be helpful to homeowners who are working on their homes. We have learned a lot through our discussions of what is allowable, what isn’t, what’s cost-effective, what vendors or products are especially helpful or useful, what modern materials are able to substitute for original materials, and which may ultimately be destructive, what not to do if you want a state tax credit, etc.

A suggestion to write guidelines was made at the September 15, 2004 Town Hall meeting, and there were volunteers, so we started writing guidelines and seeking community input. The Landmarks Commission would *prefer* that each local district in the County have its own guidelines, based on the national standards, but tailored, if possible, to meet the unique characteristics of each historic neighborhood.

Local guidelines are also a good idea to give predictability on the LPC's interpretation of some of the broad terms in the law (see question 17). Local guidelines approved by the LPC can also allow proposed changes that do not have a major or adverse effect to move quickly to approval.

17. How do I know if I need to go through the review process with the Landmarks Commission?

You need to go through the review process if you are making changes to the exterior of your home or building or proposing to demolish any "structure" on your lot. Adding a garage or shed also needs review as does a fence.

Quoted exactly from Section 32-7-403 in the County law, a Historic Permit, approved by the LPC, is required for the following activities in a County Historic District:

Excavation or construction or erection of any building, fence, wall, or other new structure of any kind...

Alteration, demolition, reconstruction, or removal of an exterior architectural feature of any existing structure; or

Demolition of any structure.

That's the law. The RHDC can help homeowners understand how the law applies with the changes they have in mind, to evaluate alternative solutions, and to submit a permit application that has the best likelihood of approval.

18. Do I need approval to repair the windows of my house?

Repair of existing features, not involving

substitution with new kinds of materials, does not need approval from the LPC. Substitution of new materials that change the character of a building's exterior does need approval. Historic windows are typically among the most important character-defining features of a building.

19. Do I need approval to install safety or courtesy lighting?

No approval is necessary to install safety or courtesy lighting.

20. What if I want to replace the vinyl siding on my house?

The LPC usually has ruled that homeowners can replace vinyl siding with vinyl siding. This is known as "replacement-in-kind."

"Replacement-in-kind" generally does not require prior approval from the Landmarks Commission. One should be aware, however, that vinyl siding potentially could do serious damage to houses sided with wood. Unlike wood, vinyl does not breathe. Water vapor trying to pass to the outside is trapped in the wall where it reaches its dew point temperature and condenses. The water then puddles at the base of the wall, leading to rot in sills and other structural components, along with unpleasant problems like mold and insect damage.

21. I want to add a deck to the back of my house. Do I need a permit to do that?

Yes, you will need a permit. This is a requirement of Baltimore County no matter where you live in the County. This is also an alteration to the building's exterior and will need review by the LPC. The LPC usually does not object to decks that are not visible from the street or can be screened to minimize visibility. These kinds of questions can be addressed in the local guidelines.

22. What if I plan to remodel my kitchen or bathroom? Do I need approval from the Landmarks Commission?

No, you do not need approval from either the local committee or Landmarks Commission for any *interior* renovations that do not change the architectural features of the *exterior* of your home. However, if you wish to be eligible for the State tax credits, you must get approval from the Maryland Historical Trust *before* you begin the work. You may still be eligible for state tax credits for interior work. Theda Mayer is willing to assist homeowners with paperwork for tax credits.

23. Do I need approval to change my front door?

Like windows, doors are among a building's most important character-defining features. Their replacement requires approval.

24. Do I need approval to dig in my garden?

No, you do not need approval to dig in your garden.

25. Do I need approval to replace broken boards?

Repair of broken features using the same material does not need approval.

26. What if I want to replace the old roof on my house?

Replacement-in-kind – for example, asphalt shingles with asphalt shingles – does not require approval. A roof change does need approval, however, if the roof material is changing or if there is a change in the existing roof-line, such as adding a dormer.

For example, if a homeowner wants to tear off a standing-seam metal or slate roof and replace it with fiberglass or asphalt shingles, the project needs approval from the LPC.

27. Is it true that the local historic committee can tell me what color to paint my house?

No, it is *not* true. The LPC has absolutely no authority over color, and the RHDC has no authority to *require* anything from anyone.

28. Does being a historic district really keep development out of our community? Can you give me some examples?

Whether or not development *can* occur is controlled by County zoning, not by historic district designation. A district, however, can control the *appearance* of whatever development does occur, to make it compatible with community character.

Also, in at least one case, Relay's historic district status was a central part of the reasoning that helped to defeat a highly inappropriate proposal for a "panhandle" lot that would have placed a new house visually intruding into the privacy of the rear yards of existing, historic houses. [*This case was known as the Coll property, 1544 Rolling Road.*]

29. Can you suggest some Internet websites that I might check in order to educate myself a little more?

Sure. There are probably many more sites than we know about, but we have found the following websites helpful:

www.baltimorecountymd.gov This website has information on local historic preservation. Click on Agencies at the top of the screen, then click Planning, and finally click on Historic Preservation.

www.marylandhistoricaltrust.net This has the full information on the State Tax Credit program, and a direct link to the Federal program.

www.fieldstonecommunitygroup.org This was the first County district to prepare their own local guidelines. The guidelines are approved by the LPC and are the model on which we are basing our draft for Relay.

www.cr.nps.gov/hps/tps/tax/rhb/stand.htm This website has the full details of the Secretary of the Interior's standards and other useful information about rehabilitating historic properties.

30. Where can I find out more about the history of Relay?

First, we suggest that you talk to your neighbors. This may seem obvious, but it really isn't to all new residents. Your neighbors know a lot about the recent and long ago history of our community. You might also find Daniel Carroll Toomey's book, [A History of Relay, Maryland and the Thomas Viaduct](#) interesting. You could also check the local history collections at the Arbutus and Catonsville libraries.

31. Are there any other historic districts in our county?

There are currently eight historic districts in Baltimore County enacted by the County Council: Glyndon, Monkton, Corbett, Lutherville, Sudbrook Park, Franklinville, Relay, and Fieldstone. There are currently two historic districts in Howard County: Ellicott City and Lawyers Hill.

32. Why would anybody serve on the Relay Historic District Committee? Are these people paid?

No, the volunteers on the local Relay Historic District Committee are not paid. They are Relay residents and property owners who are dedicated to preserving the quiet beauty, history, and high quality of our neighborhood. Committee members are required to have experience and/or interest in preservation and building techniques in historic preservation, and to foster education in grants, designs, etc. They must also be landowners within the historic district.

These questions were reviewed prior to publication by the Baltimore County Landmarks Commission's staff.