

Draft Goals for the 2015 Historic Preservation Plan

Recognizing historic resources

Complete the city survey

If we are unaware of the history around us, we will be unable to appreciate its value. The first step toward understanding is to identify the heritage we have. More than 100,000 buildings in the District are now documented in historic surveys. Comprehensive photographic records of the city are also available on both commercial and government websites. This vast archive can be used by everyone from scholars doing research to residents just curious about their homes.

We should set an ambitious goal to complete a comprehensive source of basic historic information on all of the city's buildings by 2015.

Publicize history in new ways

The course of our history can be traced in the places still present. The DC Inventory of Historic Sites is the city's list of those places, now designated as historic landmarks and historic districts. What these places can tell us is explained in a document available in print and on the HPO website. These stories are the pathway to appreciating our heritage, but they could be made more vivid and accessible in multiple ways. The first step is a more accessible and comprehensive illustrated presentation of the material.

By 2015, preservation partners should create an interactive searchable web version of the Inventory and update the print format to make it more inviting and informative.

Map what's important

Online maps are increasingly becoming a primary tool for distributing public information in a visual format. Simple maps of the District's designated historic properties are now available in various forms, but much better use of the District's geographic information system (GIS) technology would open new perspectives on all aspects of the city's designated and undesignated heritage.

By 2015, mapping of all types of information about historic properties should become routinely available to preservation professionals and the public.



Promoting appreciation of our heritage

Tell community stories across the city

Residents all across the District want to tell the stories of the people and places they find significant to their lives. For the past several years, the Humanities Council of Washington DC and preservation partners have engaged us in exploring our DC community history. At the same time, Cultural Tourism DC has led us on walking trails to rediscover the heritage of our neighborhoods.

We should add more Heritage Trails by 2015, and the DC Community Heritage Project should become an even stronger partnership providing local organizations with the resources and assistance they need for grass-roots preservation in our communities.

Foster a local dialogue about preservation

The more residents become involved in historic preservation, the greater the need for a community preservation forum to exchange ideas and information. A web-based interactive forum designed around Community Heritage Guides can link people and organizations while it also spreads information and promotes dialogue.

By 2015, there should be an online Community Heritage Guide for each DC ward with preservation resources, maps, historical information, and an issues forum for public discussion.

Make archaeology visible

Washington's landscape has been a place of human occupation for thousands of years, and the physical evidence of this history is a fascinating part of the District's heritage. Unfortunately, archaeological artifacts often go unnoticed when they are underground or conserved in collections. There is now substantial progress toward making the wealth of DC archaeology more accessible and better understood as a public resource.

These efforts should continue, and by 2015 they should culminate in the establishment of a District of Columbia archaeological curation facility that makes collections available for research and public enjoyment.



Protecting historic resources

Designate intelligently for the future

Our heritage is protected through the public process of designating historic landmarks and districts. Everyone who takes pride in this legacy has a stake these outcomes. Whether preservationists or property owners, we should all strive for a transparent and rational system that operates fairly in the interests of our city. Only in this way can the District continue its exceptional record of achieving consensus on designations. We should keep open minds, but as perspectives expand on the record of history, we should still give priority to the properties that most merit attention.

By 2015, we should complete designations in the heart of the city and in other key areas where historic resources are at risk.

Promote the environmental and economic benefits of preservation

Preservation represents the best of sustainable and environmentally responsible building practice. By promoting this message, we can strengthen the case for protecting our heritage. Preservation also supports economic growth: adapted buildings mean both resources saved and jobs created. At the same time, historic environments are not just buildings, but also the historic landscapes and parks and public places where we pursue outdoor life. These civic spaces also need to remain vital and active: rejuvenation supports a healthy quality of life.

As preservationists, we need to leverage these arguments so that by 2015 there are better public incentives in support of preservation.

Take action against needless destruction

Whether deliberate or the result of neglect, demolition destroys the record of our heritage. Crude pop-ups and tear-downs disfigure the beauty of our city. Disregard for the scale of our streets creates monstrosities and bad neighbors. All too often, slipshod construction and flagrant building violations erode the patina of craftsmanship. This kind of needless destruction shows disdain for the shared interests of neighbors and communities alike.

By 2015, we should develop better tools to combat these problems and shape a more responsible direction for enhancing our city as it grows.



Improving project review

Make guidelines more usable

It is through a home construction project that most city residents encounter the practice of preservation. Communities have the same experience when a new building is proposed. So do builders and developers. The government's process of reviewing these projects for compatibility with historic property can be simple or daunting, but its rules should be understandable and its design guidelines clear. Recent progress has been made to improve design guidelines, but some are still dated and inadequate.

Preservation officials should continue this effort with public involvement, so that by 2015, better illustrated and more understandable guidelines are in place for the design review process.

Strengthen government partnerships

Government is a major steward of historic property, and effective working relationships among government agencies are critical to the success of the preservation projects that businesses, residents, and communities rely on. Preservation reviews have long been mandatory for federal projects, and in 2006 the District adopted a similar fiscally prudent requirement for routine consideration of potential historic properties in local public projects. Key District agencies are joining forces to streamline preservation reviews, but more work can be done.

Government agencies should continue these efforts so that by 2015, the full benefit of coordinated preservation planning accrues to all public projects.

Keep communities engaged

Preservation works best when communities participate in it actively. Local volunteers and city professionals support each other through an open dialogue sharing information, perspectives, and expertise. Both sides partake in the duty and rewards of this communication. At the same time, neighborhood residents and organizations draw strength from each other. The Historic Districts Coalition has fostered this collaboration, but is now uncertain how to sustain its efforts into the future.

These mutual support systems are essential. We must attend to them so that by 2015 the District benefits from a stronger and more effective community voice in public decision-making.



Planning for preservation

Recapture the synergy of Main Streets and transit

For most of its history, the District has grown around the framework of its public transportation systems. Both commerce and communities structured themselves so they would thrive alongside transit. In more recent decades, the dominance of automobiles and sprawl have upset this balance. But the pendulum is now swinging back in favor of traditional urbanism, and the city's architectural heritage stands to benefit. Magnificent structures like Union Station can be reborn again, and neighborhood Main Streets can be rescued from their sleepy decay.

We should seize these opportunities, so that by 2015, the District has a vision for breathing new vigor into these arteries of community life.

Anticipate campus growth

From Northwest to Southeast, every part of the District is endowed with historic campuses—most laid out for educational institutions, hospitals, military installations, or national religious centers. These are some of our finest historic environments, and they are rich in history even if they lack official recognition. As new development and new users arrive on these campuses, preservation routinely arises as a factor whether planned for or not. But prudent planning should assess historic features before development plans are formulated.

We should establish priorities, and by 2015 preservationists should work with these institutions to evaluate and recognize the historic value of their buildings and landscapes.

Promote affordable housing

Washington is fortunate in its vast resource of usable older buildings. Neighborhoods thrive where this fabric is intact. Yet hundreds of buildings are decaying or underutilized, even as they are most critically needed. Homeowners face costly repairs. Entrepreneurs struggle to set up shop in small storefronts. Only by bundling incentives can affordable housing providers create homes from vacant apartments. The District's financial incentives are few—the successful historic homeowner grant program is one—and we lag behind nearby localities.

With a concerted effort, we can achieve a local financial incentive to help repair our older buildings as affordable housing for residents and small businesses, and the District should set this goal for 2015.

