

# USING CONSERVATION DISTRICTS

The City of Pittsburgh is investigating the potential use of historic conservation overlay districts to help protect the character of some traditional neighborhoods that are not designated as local historic districts. Conservation districts may be used to promote specific neighborhood objectives related to maintaining character, address issues, protect traditional development patterns, and discourage unnecessary demolition. In most cases, they are designed to have a simple administrative process.

This handout provides background material to support a discussion on the potential use of conservation districts in Pittsburgh.

## Purpose of a Conservation District

Communities and neighborhoods around the country use conservation districts to address a variety of objectives and issues. Conservation districts are often used to:

- » Help maintain a neighborhood or area with distinctive character (that is not a historic district).
- » Address the mass and scale of new buildings in an older, traditional neighborhood.
- » Promote active, pedestrian-friendly streets.
- » Address the demolition of existing buildings that promote neighborhood character.
- » Support the reuse of existing buildings.
- » Support retention of existing businesses or affordable housing.
- » Provide a buffer or transition around a sensitive feature such as a historic landmark, historic district, or natural resource.
- » Provide interim protection to a neighborhood or area that may later be designated as a historic district.

A community process, including workshops and stakeholder meetings, will help determine which local objectives a potential conservation district tool should support.

## Comparing Conservation and Historic Districts

Typically, a conservation district does not have the “fine-grained” level of design review that exists in a historic district. In a historic district, any work on the exterior of a building is subject to review and approval. In most conservation districts, alteration to the skin of an existing building is not regulated, only major alterations, or additions, and new construction. Thus, a conservation district addresses neighborhood character at a broader level by shaping future change rather than protecting specific historic resources.

With respect to historic resources, a conservation district may:

- » Have many historic buildings, but not enough to qualify as being a historic district.
- » Be eligible as a historic district, but the neighborhood does not wish to pursue historic designation.

If individual historic landmarks are located within a conservation district, historic preservation regulations continue to apply. A conservation district may also be used to provide a transition around an existing historic district, or may be applied to an area that could later be designated as a historic district.



### What is a Conservation District?

A conservation district is a zoning designation that applies tools to address issues or promote specific neighborhood objectives. It typically implements tools to promote compatible new construction and additions. The focus is generally on maintaining a preferred neighborhood character as seen from the street or sidewalk. Unlike a historic district, a conservation district does not protect specific existing building features.

Note that the neighborhood conservation district tools described in this handout have no relationship with Natural Resource Conservation Districts managed by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

### Contact for More Information

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## Potential Tools Applied Through a Conservation District

Neighborhoods may use a conservation district to apply a range of tools that address specific objectives or issues. Conservation districts are most often associated with application of design review - a process in which City staff or a design review board evaluates new construction, additions or other neighborhood projects using established design guidelines. However, they may also apply new or revised zoning standards that provide more predictability and require fewer administrative resources.

Examples of tools used in conservation districts include:

<b>Regulations</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Incentives</b>
» Zoning standards to assure compatible building form and scale (administered by staff)	» A heritage awareness publication to build neighborhood pride	» Maintenance assistance
» Design review to assure compatible new construction (administered by staff, or a board)	» Technical assistance publications to assist with maintenance	» Financing assistance for compatible infill
» Demolition review or delay, to consider alternatives	» Voluntary guidelines for improvement to existing buildings	» Technical assistance (i.e., evaluation of an existing structure for reuse)

The table below illustrates the relationship between possible neighborhood objectives and potential conservation district tools. The table does not list all potential objectives or tools that could be addressed using a conservation district.

Neighborhood Objective	Potential Conservation District Tools		
	Demolition Delay Ordinance	Form-based Design Standards (1)	Design Review with Guidelines (2)
Assure Compatible Additions to Existing Buildings		✓	✓
Assure Compatible New Construction		✓	✓
Reduce Demolition of Existing Buildings	✓		
Support the Re-use of Existing Buildings	✓	✓	
Preserve Historic Buildings	Conservation districts generally do not provide specific tools for preservation of historic resources. Such tools are best provided through individual historic landmark designation or inclusion in a historic district.		

1. Potential form-based design standards generally apply in addition to existing zoning.

2. Design guidelines may be administered by City staff or by an existing review board or commission.

## Application of a Conservation District

A conservation district system may be applied using a range of approaches. The best approach depends on the desired balance between customization, cost and ease of administration. Districts may be set up to apply the same, or similar tools to a range of neighborhoods or may be customized on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis. For example, the city could create several 'pre-made' conservation districts, allowing a neighborhood to choose which one best addresses its objectives. Alternatively, the city could allow neighborhoods to create their own conservation district using customized tools. A blended approach might allow a neighborhood to create its own conservation district, but limit the range of tools or potential customization.



### Why is Pittsburgh Considering Conservation Districts?

Residents have expressed concern with changes occurring in several of Pittsburgh's older neighborhoods, including vacant properties and inappropriate new construction. To address these and other potential concerns, the City of Pittsburgh received a Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (PHMC) grant to help fund a conservation district study.

The study will identify tools for community groups seeking to preserve the historic nature of neighborhoods that lack sufficient historic significance or integrity to be considered for designation as local historic districts. The study began in June 2013 and will be complete by November 2013. The process will include a range of opportunities for public participation, including a community workshop and presentation.

### Zoning Overlays

A conservation district is most often applied as a zoning overlay to implement additional tools that are not included in the base zoning. This means that existing zoning regulations continue to set forth the basic rules for development, while a conservation district overlay applies additional standards or design review. For example, the base zoning may limit overall building height, while a conservation district overlay requires that buildings step down in height towards their neighbors.