

Why historic district designation for Congress Street makes sense

Portland's authentic historic architecture and distinctive quality of place is one of its key competitive advantages – one identified in the recent Brookings Institution report and one that has assured our ranking in many “best places” lists. We need to support Congress Street's authenticity and distinction, an important asset that inspires economic development for the area.



Congress Street's revitalization as a commercial, retail, and arts district will be reinforced by historic district status. For example, the Old Port, once a derelict area is now one of the most sought-after and vibrant tourist and retail destinations in the city. The American Planning Association just selected Commercial Street, which is part of the Waterfront historic district, as one of the 10 Great Streets in the US for 2008 based on its distinctive character, strong sense of place, and mixture of uses including marine, tourism, retail,

commercial, and residential. Commercial Street's outstanding character incorporates old and new architecture, and economic vibrancy. The same is possible for Congress Street.

Historic districts provide consistent standards for design review that help protect the investment of property owners who are rehabilitating their properties. All owners benefit as additional properties are rehabilitated to district standards. In addition, the character of the district as whole is preserved. The district helps assure the highest quality rehabilitation for historic buildings and encourages the best in new construction for the area.

Historic district designation will provide eligibility for the new Maine historic tax credit program, which offers powerful incentives for rehabilitating historic buildings, including a 25 percent refundable state tax credit and opportunities for smaller projects in the \$50,000 to \$250,000 range, for buildings that are designated contributing and landmark properties in the district. *The district designation saves time, as property owners do not have to file a separate National Register application to access the tax credit. In addition, some buildings that qualify as part of the district might not achieve Register eligibility status on their own.*

Portland's 18-year experience has shown the historic preservation board review process to be fair, flexible and reasonable. Many applications are approved by staff. Those that require board approval are often resolved in a single meeting. Most preservation projects can be handled by the owner and a general contractor. *Many owners find the staff and board a useful resource, sensitive to the costs and practicalities of rehabilitating historic structures.*

Historic district designation will embrace exciting new architecture. The ordinance provides standards for new construction that encourage good contemporary design. The designation for Congress Street specifically allows for higher building heights based on the underlying zoning. The Historic Preservation Board includes several members who are architects and has experience approving new construction in projects such as the addition to the Chase Levitt Building on Dana Street, the new CIEE building next to the Customs House on Fore Street, and many others.

Historic district designation will help avoid small incremental changes and larger design decisions that could be detrimental to the character of the district as a whole. Relatively small changes to storefronts over a period of years, including signage and awnings, may not be compatible with the building or its context. On a larger scale, the examples below, a photograph taken in the late 1980s contrasted with a historic view, show how coating the building facades with stucco drastically changed the appearance of the row of historic buildings. District designation would prevent such mistakes.



Properties in historic districts experience stabilized or increased property values, as has been shown in studies in Georgia, Colorado, Maryland, Virginia and other states. Historic district status does not trigger reevaluation.



Historic districts attract tourists. According to the City website 3.6 million tourists visit Portland annually. Congress Street can benefit from tourist visits. In addition, studies have shown that heritage tourists, those who choose to travel to historic places, spend more and stay longer in the communities they visit.

Historic districts enhance business recruitment by firms seeking quality of life benefits. For example, CIEE moved their offices to Portland from Boston to the heart of the Old Port, providing more professional jobs and increased vibrancy to the area. The entire community benefits from a vital economy and lively commercial zone.

Congress Street's history as Portland's main street includes examples of a range of architectural styles from the Longfellow House to the present. It is important to retain the distinctive features of Congress Street, including its wonderful array of high quality historic buildings, and to carefully consider changes that could enhance or detract from that quality. Examples of new buildings that enhance the Congress Street district area include the lofts at 492 Congress Street, the Chestnut Street lofts behind City Hall, and the Portland Public Market.