

A number of questions have been raised during and following the first two community meetings held regarding the possible nomination for a new historic district in Southwest.

Below we have attempted to answer the most common questions, to the extent possible:

What is the driving force behind a designation?

- Residents of the project area concerned about the potential loss of important housing and social and economic diversity in the community, and who believe the historic nature of the district is worth preserving.
- Why now?
 - This issue has been raised periodically, and was raised again approximately a year ago, when SWNA had volunteers who were interested and willing to put in the time to explore the merits of a designation, and could secure the necessary funding from the DC Preservation League to undertake the research.
- Why wasn't this done previously "when a real effort could have been made to preserve the neighborhood"?
 - While there has been periodic interest from certain members of the community and some volunteer effort to look at this issue, a lack of financial support prevented properly researching and writing a nomination.

Where did the funds for this effort come from?

- This effort was funded by a \$10,000 grant from the DC Preservation League's Preservation Initiatives Grant program (<https://www.dcpreservation.org/grants/>). SWNA applied for this grant based on the expressed community interest in considering a historic designation, to hire a professional consultant with specific expertise in historic preservation.
- No monetary benefits are being sought or obtained by SWNA, and all grant funds are being spent on the research and preparation of a draft nomination. This is an effort to preserve the history of a unique part of our community so that it will remain for future generations to live in and learn from.

What is the value or significance of the buildings that would be included in the Historic District?

- These buildings represent a unique chronological progression from 1892 through 1960 of affordable working-class housing in Washington D.C. Due to their intended affordability, many of these properties lack typical high-style flourishes and architectural detailing seen in upper class historic homes of the period. However, they retain a strong sense of place in a neighborhood that has been a continual epicenter of efforts to use housing policy to attempt provide better living conditions for residents. This includes some of the first 'sanitary housing' in the country, which was designed by the Washington Sanitary Improvement Company "to supply to wage earners improved, wholesome homes at reasonable rents...And to provide the very best accommodations from the stand point of hygiene, and, as to comfort, the utmost which a given cost will permit."¹ Later developments continued this mission, such as James Creek Housing, built by the Alley Dwelling Authority and designed by Albert Cassell (the prolific African-American architect whose work shaped Howard University's campus and many

¹ George M. Kober, *The History and Development of the Housing Movement in the City of Washington, DC*. Washington, DC: Washington Sanitary Housing Companies, 1927, 21. *Taken from the Old Southwest nomination form.*

academic communities throughout the country.) Also, Syphax Gardens Public Housing, built by the National Capitol Housing Authority, remains as an early example of public housing development in DC. These stand in contrast to the nearby large-scale Urban Renewal redevelopment that replaced similar housing stock, once prevalent in SW. Some properties have seen alterations over time, as city dwellings do, but most remain significantly intact representations of their times. In the face of rapid redevelopment in SW, preservation becomes increasingly critical.

What additional regulations apply to historic districts?

- Designation would add an additional layer to the standard permitting application process for work that impacts the public facing exterior of structures that are designated as contributing to the character of the district. According to the HPO approximately 90% of projects that conform to established guidelines require only review by office staff, and can typically be approved in one day to a month. Some projects are considered regular maintenance and do not require review, while other minor or routine maintenance only requires a "same day" review by DC HPO staff. Larger projects, such as additions, may require review by the city's Historic Preservation Review Board, which meets once a month. This additional layer to the permitting process is the intent of designation, and the means by which the architectural character of the historic district is maintained.

Aren't the properties in the proposed historic district already protected under current DC code?

- Per the DC HPO, recent zoning changes have reduced the impact that rooftop and rear additions can have on a neighborhood. With the recent zoning changes, for example, a rooftop addition can be added up to 35 feet, so long as it does not compromise roof features or structural integrity. Under Historic District designation, rooftop additions are still permissible if they cannot be seen from the street.
- Portions of this area are also zoned under the Capitol Gateway, which would allow a higher density per square foot than the existing housing occupies with potential construction up to 100 feet in height, which would be incongruous with the current scale of the neighborhood.
- Zoning variances occur throughout the city, so while the current zoning does provide some protections for most of the area if no variance is given by the Zoning Commission, it is not as uniformly protective as historic designation would be.

What would the relationship be between historic district designation and the current priorities established by DC Office of Planning?

- The historic district overlay would supersede any previous zoning within the boundaries of the district for "contributing" properties. "Contributing" properties are those determined to be historically significant.
- The SW Neighborhood Plan also includes a focus on "protecting the low scale residential areas of the Southwest neighborhood" north of Buzzard Point.
- The Buzzard Point Vision Framework goals to "reconnect with existing neighborhoods" and "preserve existing affordable housing in adjacent neighborhoods" could be facilitated by historic designation.

Can publicly (city/federal) owned properties be nominated?

- "City and federally owned properties can be included in the boundaries of a historic district and can be considered contributing." - DC HPO

What is the potential impact on property values of historic district designation?

- Property values are affected by a wide range of factors, including many that are subjective in nature. That being the case, there are few examples in which historic designation has correlated with a decrease in value. In part, this is because designation creates a sense of stability in housing stock, and gives an added intangible importance that tends to raise desirability encourage maintenance of properties. This is reflected in various neighborhoods that have received designation, such as Dupont Circle, Capitol Hill, Georgetown, Shaw, and others around the city.
- Nationwide studies that include D.C. and can be found online have determined that on the whole, those properties within historic districts typically maintain or increase in value over time.
 - See SWNA website for links to additional national study summaries - www.swdc.org
- What is the impact of historic designation on a property owner's ability to sell their property?
 - Developers/builders will still buy properties in historic districts, but their ability to demolish or significantly enlarge contributing structures would be curtailed by historic preservation regulations.
 - Sales between private owners should include notification to any buyer that they are purchasing a property in a historic district.

What are the Benefits to homeowners of historic designation?

- If the City Council includes the Old Southwest Historic District in the list of eligible historic districts, homeowners would be eligible to apply for the city's Homeowner Grant Fund in the future. The request to extend this law to include the new district would have to come from the ANC and your Council member. "The amendment to include it may take a year or more." - DC HPO
- The district designation would provide long term stability for the community and retain a unique housing stock that has for decades served a diverse community of Washingtonians, including those residing in publicly owned housing, which contributes to the story and character of the neighborhood.
- Some buyers are drawn to historically designated properties/neighborhoods, which could increase property values.

Can an individual property be excluded?

- A property owner cannot "opt out" of being included in a historic district. If there is good historical or architectural justification for not including the property and if it is on the edge of a proposed district, a property owner could make a formal request to the sponsor to revise the proposed district's boundaries to exclude their property based upon this historical/architectural argument.
- If the property in question is located in the middle of the proposed boundaries, then it could not be excluded, as historic districts cannot contain "donut holes."

What is the process relating to a possible nomination?

- The current effort was intended to research and draft a nomination, should a nomination be justified by the research, which could then be considered for submission by SWNA or another qualifying organization. The grant from the DC Preservation League to support this effort also stipulated certain progress milestones, which we have adhered to.
- As required under the grant, SWNA has held two community meetings with residents of the impacted area, and the third is October 11, 2018. These meetings have run concurrent with milestones during

the consultants' research so they could discuss their findings with the community. A web page was also created on the SWNA website following the first public meeting to share information and updates.

www.swdc.org/old-southwest/

- The next step will be for the SWNA Board to review all of the comments and feedback submitted throughout this process, and determine if it believes that submission of the nomination is appropriate for the proposed Historic District and the larger SW neighborhood.
- Should the Board decide to submit the nomination, the nomination would then follow the DC HPO/HPRB process defined here: <https://planning.dc.gov/node/883602>. *Should the SWNA Board decide not to submit the nomination, another qualifying entity could still decide to submit it.*

Does SWNA have the right/power to "label and constrict" property as historic?

- The Historic Preservation Review Board (HPRB) and DC Historic Preservation Office (HPO), not SWNA, have the right to declare a property historically significant and meriting protection. Past submissions to these authorities made by SWNA have been accepted and received historic designation, including Capitol Park Tower, Town Center East, Waterfront Tower, and Tiber Island.
- Per the DC HPO: "A neighborhood organization such as SWNA can submit a landmark application if historic preservation is in its bylaws." SWNA bylaws confer standing by virtue of the following paragraph:

"SWNA's mission shall be to maintain and improve the quality of life for all residents of Southwest, by opening to every resident the wide cultural horizon of urban living; helping to create rich social, educational, and economic opportunities; promoting development of the economic and aesthetic potential of Southwest; and preserving Southwest's diverse history. This mission shall be pursued without regard to the social, economic and racial barriers that have divided cities in the past."

Is support of 51% of property owners required for nomination or approval by Review Board?

- The DC HPO would like the sponsor of a nomination, SWNA in this case, to consider the views of all residents in the area, to include renters and owners. However, the HPO does not have a specific threshold or require a vote of any kind for submission of a nomination.
- HPO/HPRB want to ensure that the affected community has been well-informed about what it means for them as property owners/renters/residents to be in a historic district, no matter what the pulse of the community is regarding historic designation.
- Should the sponsor choose to move forward with the nomination, any District resident may make their opinion known by testifying for or against the nomination in writing or in person at the Historic Preservation Review Board hearing. All HPRB hearings are open to the public.

Project information available online: www.swdc.org/old-southwest

Prior studies written about SW: www.swdc.org/swna/task-forces/history-task-force/history-studies/

Information on construction dates for individual buildings can be found on [HistoryQuest DC](http://HistoryQuestDC)

DC Historic Preservation Office website: planning.dc.gov/page/historic-preservation-office