



**TOWN OF ACTON**  
**HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION**  
**472 MAIN STREET**  
**ACTON, MASSACHUSETTS, 01720**  
**[hdc@acton-ma.gov](mailto:hdc@acton-ma.gov)**

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January 2021

Dear Historic District Property Owner,

You are receiving this letter because you own a property in an Historic District in Acton. Many of you may be familiar with the Historic District Commission (HDC) but for those of you who would like to know more, we would like to introduce you to our process<sup>1</sup> and to let you know that the HDC stands ready to help in any way we can, whether you are considering applying for a Certificate of Appropriateness or just need advice pertaining to your buildings or property.

Properties within the Historic Districts carry a special distinction because of their protected status that enhances the value of both the property and community in which it is located. These districts were established to preserve the architectural significance and rich character of your neighborhood. The Historic District Commission procedures described below are intended to permit appropriate architectural changes while enhancing the districts and protecting neighborhoods from alterations that might lower economic and aesthetic values of individual properties.

### **Acton's Historic Districts and the Historic District Commission**

In Acton, there are three Historic Districts: South Acton, West Acton and Acton Center. Each is administered by the HDC according to the rules and regulations set forth in Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 40C, Chapter P of the by-laws of the Town of Acton as enacted at Special Town Meeting in 1990, and the Rules and Regulations adopted by the HDC. The HDC consists of qualified volunteers appointed by the Select Board and whenever possible includes a property owner or resident of each district, an architect and a real estate agent. The Commissioners are required by law to review the architectural appropriateness of most proposed exterior design changes in the three districts, whether they are alterations, new additions or removal of structures. These rules apply to all buildings in the districts, even those you might not consider "historic". It is the owner's responsibility to submit a completed application to the Commission to start the review process prior to commencing any work and prior to the issuance of building permits. Certain items and changes are excluded from review, so if in doubt please contact the Commission. Detailed guidelines governing exterior changes in an Historic District have been adopted by the Commission and are available on the Town of Acton website [acton-ma.gov](http://acton-ma.gov) or from the Town Clerk.

As required by law, if you plan to make exterior alterations to a property in an Historic District and it falls under the HDC's review, you must first obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness from the Commission,

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<sup>1</sup> This letter, however, does not substitute for any of the procedures described in our Rules and Regulations or in our By-law. Both can be found on the Town of Acton website: [www.acton-ma.gov](http://www.acton-ma.gov).

even if a building permit is not necessary. If a building permit is necessary, the Building Inspector will direct you to the Commission. A Certificate of Appropriateness (CoA) must be obtained from the Commission prior to the Building Department issuing a building permit. To obtain the certificate, an application must be submitted to the Commission via the Town Clerk. This puts into motion the HDC review process, in which abutters are notified and sometimes a Public Hearing held, and the Commission must find that the proposed work is appropriate as defined under Historic-District law. Applications are easy to complete but must include sufficient information to clearly and accurately indicate to the Commission the exact nature of the proposed changes, including plans, drawings, photographs of the existing structure, manufacturer's specifications, etc. The more detail provided the better. A member of the Commission will be assigned to you as liaison, who will answer questions about the HDC process. The Commission will then decide on the appropriateness of your proposal. A copy of the Historic District By-law, the HDC Rules and Regulations, Design and Solar Guidelines, and instructions for filing an application are on file at the Town Clerk's office and available on-line at [www.acton-ma.gov](http://www.acton-ma.gov).

Property owners are encouraged to consult informally with the Commission at the earliest stages of their proposed project. The Commission is available for non-binding consultations even prior to the submission of a formal application. If your project is substantial involving either rehabilitation and/or new construction, the HDC recommends property owners seek input from architects, contractors or preservation consultants with experience performing work in an Historic District.

Examples of items typically requiring a CoA: changes visible from a public way, including installing new or replacement siding, trim or shutters and decks; additions, demolitions, removing or altering porches, balconies or other building elements and features; replacing or installing exterior doors, chimney caps intake or exhaust vents, windows, stairs, gutters or railings; light fixtures, satellite dishes, antennas, sheds, skylights, solar panels and exterior HVAC piping; and site features greater than one foot above grade such as site walls and fences.

Examples of items typically NOT requiring a CoA: color of paint, storm windows, storm doors, temporary window air conditioners; planting or removal of trees, shrubs and other plants (except when required for screening, as specified as a condition on a CoA); flags and flagpoles, movable garden furniture and garden objects and ornaments such as bird and bathhouses, bird feeders, and rocks in rock gardens; temporary play equipment (not set in cement or attached to a building); temporary signs and banners, including political and real estate signs; and minor repairs and maintenance which do not alter the visual appearance of the structure or property site features.

Work done in violation of the above-cited laws without a Certificate of Appropriateness may subject you to a fine or court action and will require re-work to be suitable for the Historic District.

### **How to Obtain a Certificate of Appropriateness**

The process involves three stages:

1. **Application:** Call or visit the Town Clerk's Office, or download a copy of the application, along with the attached instructions, from the Town of Acton website. You are encouraged to meet with the Commission informally prior to submitting an application to discuss proposed designs or for assistance with the application prior to formal submission. Please feel free also to contact Commission members for assistance: [hdc@acton-ma.gov](mailto:hdc@acton-ma.gov). You may also contact individual

Commission members, listed below. Once your application is complete, please submit it to the Town Clerk's office, which will stamp it and collect any necessary filing fees as denoted on the application form. Please note that it can take up to 60 days for a decision on your application. Fortunately, most applications are reviewed in a shorter time frame.

2. **Next Steps:** Upon receipt of the stamped application, an appointment with the Commission is scheduled, unless the Commission judges that a Certificate of Non-Applicability may be issued. A member of the Commission will be appointed to you as liaison to investigate the proposed change and to work with the applicant to help with the process. Notice of the planned activity is given to abutting property owners, and if requested by abutters or otherwise required, a Public Hearing is scheduled, with notice given in The Beacon. Under the Town By-law, a Public Hearing notice must be advertised in the newspaper consecutively for two weeks prior to the Public Hearing.
3. **Certificate:** When approved, a Certificate of Appropriateness (or in some cases, a Certificate of Non-Applicability), with any special findings or conditions specified, is sent to the applicant, Building Inspector and Town Clerk. Note that Certificates of Appropriateness are transferable to new owners upon sale of a property, but only if the new owner applies to the Commission for such a transfer.

### **HDC Meetings and Request for Volunteers**

We are a volunteer citizen board and are currently looking for new Commission members. All Acton residents are encouraged to participate. Please contact us for more information, come to one of our meetings, or pick up a town of Acton Volunteer Application form from the Town Clerk. In addition, the 7:00-7:05 p.m. time slot at each of our regularly scheduled meetings is available for citizen's questions. This is a "drop-in" time for members of the public to ask questions and share feedback without making an appointment. All of our meetings (normally the second and fourth Tuesdays) are open to the public and we warmly invite you to attend. Please contact us at any time by email: [hdc@acton-ma.gov](mailto:hdc@acton-ma.gov).

The Historic District Commission by,

David Honn, Chair  
Anita Rogers, Vice-Chair  
David Shoemaker, Secretary  
Ron Regan  
Fran Arsenault  
Art Leavens  
Zach Taillefer  
Dean Charter, Select Board Liaison

Town of Acton Historic District Commission