

ACHP Seeks Your Creative Suggestions to Improve the National Historic Preservation Program

The Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP) is working to improve the effectiveness of the national historic preservation program, and seeks your input.

The ACHP is developing a set of policy recommendations and achievable implementation strategies that can be put in place through legislative, executive, or administrative action. The recommendations will be formally submitted to the next Administration and the incoming Congress at the end of this year.

An assessment of challenges and opportunities facing the program on its 50th anniversary was prepared and made available for public input in January 2016. That input was considered and discussed at the ACHP's quarterly business meeting in March. Based on those comments and discussions, the statement has been revised and can be found following this cover. The revised statement frames the issues that are before the national historic preservation program at its 50th anniversary. The statement is not perfect but the ACHP believes that it is a good starting point for discussing what can be done to improve the program.

In June, the ACHP invited specific suggestions for policy recommendations and implementing strategies to shape the future of the program. The ACHP members are continuing to consider ideas that might be included in the final recommendations. At the NATHPO meeting, the ACHP will be hosting a session Tuesday afternoon to listen to your ideas and discuss how the ACHP intends to move forward. We look forward to hearing from you.

The National Historic Preservation Program at 50: Challenges, Opportunities, and Priorities

Legacy of the National Historic Preservation Act

Fifty years after enactment of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA), many of the major issues that drove the creation of the NHPA – energy, education, community revitalization – still resonate. The program has matured and can count many successes:

- Over 90,000 places worthy of preservation have been listed on the National Register of Historic Places
- Federal historic preservation tax credits have stimulated nearly \$120 billion in private investment in the rehabilitation of historic properties
- Nearly 125,000 federal actions are reviewed each year for their impact on historic properties
- Federal agencies have programs and policies in place that promote stewardship of historic properties
- State, tribal, and local governments partner with the federal government to extend the national preservation program into virtually every American community.

Despite these and many other accomplishments, there are promises and vision of the NHPA that remain unfulfilled and preservation continues to face the challenges of a growing and diversifying nation. Acknowledging this landscape, the membership of the ACHP has begun to analyze and discuss the challenges and the opportunities confronting the national historic preservation program at fifty. Recognizing that the NHPA has produced a comprehensive national program with a variety of highly-evolved tools and techniques to advance historic preservation goals, the task today is not to invent a completely new system, as the NHPA did in 1966. Instead, the need is to identify innovations that build on the NHPA foundations and to refine and adjust the tools currently in use, rethinking their application, to meet current and future demands. The following framework is offered as the basis for a dialogue on developing public policy recommendations to do just that.

A Look at the Future

The United States of 2016 is a vastly different nation from 1966, and over the coming decades it will continue to change significantly. Likely changes include the country's overall population size and demographic composition; settlement and work patterns as they relate to the economy; the relationship of communities to the environment, including interaction with climate change and adaptation; changes in technology and how it is accessed and used; the interrelationship of all these factors as well as yet-to-be-determined shifts in the global economy, energy production and consumption; security; and other cross-cutting issues.

Why preserve, what should be preserved, and how should it be accomplished in the future? The focus since 1966 has been on the built environment of communities as well as other tangible historic resources and their preservation. Many now believe that insufficient attention has been paid to the social and cultural values and traditions—the “intangible” aspects of heritage-associated with properties. Other factors may come into play in deciding priorities, such as a desire for enhanced public engagement or considerations of social and environmental justice. The “why” of preservation matters just as much as the “what” and the “how.”

Development and Other Pressures

There continue to be activities carried out by both the public and private sectors, and often supported by the federal government, that threaten the nation's historic resources in much the same way that federal urban renewal and highway construction programs did 50 years ago:

Energy development and transmission. Large-scale traditional and renewable energy projects are impacting cultural landscapes, traditional cultural sites, and archaeological resources in a massive way.

Infrastructure development. Rail and highway construction, harbor development, bridge replacement, transmission corridors and pipelines, and broadband build-out are posing preservation challenges.

Urban change and redevelopment. Economic and demographic shifts have left communities with abandoned properties, excess infrastructure, and insufficient financial resources to maintain services and facilities, threatening historic properties and neighborhoods in both large cities and small towns.

Sprawl and suburbanization. Many regions of the U.S. have experienced extensive suburban and exurban sprawl, transforming both rural landscapes and communities and older suburbs.

Reducing the federal footprint. Changes in government priorities and the methods of delivering public services leave historic federal properties without a current use and ripe for demolition or sale.

Continuing Challenges and Priorities for the Preservation Program

Developing public and political support. Even after fifty years, there is a broad lack of public understanding of and appreciation for the value and relevance of historic preservation to contemporary America. While many individual communities may “get it” with regard to thriving, culturally vibrant downtowns or historic residential neighborhoods, this does not necessarily translate to legislative or public funding support. In particular, the economic and environmental benefits of preservation are insufficiently measured and explained by the preservation community. Building an appreciation for history, the historic built environment, cultural landscapes, and cultural diversity among the American public, especially young people, is a critical part of this challenge.

Obtaining adequate and sustainable financial support. Competition for scarce public dollars and chronic underfunding of the governmental structure for preservation affects the delivery of needed services to stakeholders. Failure to provide the full amount of funding authorized in the Historic Preservation Fund hampers the effectiveness of the tools provided in the NHPA. Among other things, this includes critical support for protection of properties not eligible for tax incentives, as well as adequate support for tribal preservation programs. Repeated calls for simplifying the tax code threaten the continuation of highly-successful federal tax credits for rehabilitation of historic structures and the ensuing uncertainty undermines public-private partnerships that are increasingly important for preservation. The credits could also be made more useful for a wide range of preservation needs.

Providing leadership and expertise. The national preservation program needs forceful and consistent leadership at the policy level in the federal government to advance preservation as a national policy and priority. At the professional level, there are insufficient numbers and types of qualified and experienced practitioners (in both public and private sectors) in the various preservation fields and succession planning is needed to address an aging workforce.

Promoting inclusiveness and diversity. Historic preservation needs to foster and support environmental and social justice considerations in community planning and preservation. Similarly, the changing face of America needs to be better reflected in the resources recognized as historic and in the composition of the professional preservation community. A more expansive approach to significance is needed, and diverse communities must be more effectively engaged and supported in preserving their own heritage and telling their part of the American story. This includes telling difficult or complex stories that illustrate both the positive and negative interactions of different people and institutions over the course of the nation’s history.

Recognizing the full range of the nation’s heritage. In addition to acknowledging the heritage of the many diverse groups that will increasingly comprise the American public, the preservation program needs to do a better job of incorporating concepts of intangible heritage and non-traditional resources within the place-based context of historic preservation. This includes not only cultural landscapes and sites sacred to native peoples, but also less obvious culturally significant sites that do not meet other typical preservation tests like age or integrity. New tools, skills, and standards will be required to do this. Approaches to archaeological resources need to be examined to

distinguish those that warrant long-term preservation from those appropriate for research that genuinely contributes to scientific knowledge. Historic sites associated with the recent past, including 20th century “modern” architecture, need to be evaluated to identify those worthy of preservation.

Improving preservation processes and systems. Current criteria for evaluating historic significance and legal protective mechanisms need to be updated to reflect the values communities place on their heritage and to elevate outcomes over process. Complexity and over-reliance on professional expertise often stifles public engagement and impedes the preservation of what citizens really value. A fresh look at the procedures and criteria that guide the recognition, protection and enhancement of historic properties offers opportunities for achieving greater transparency, stakeholder and public participation, and efficiency. Such a re-examination could also promote better integration of preservation with other environmental and social impact assessment systems and spur innovative thought about tools, techniques, and technology.

Respecting the cultures, views, and concerns of indigenous peoples. While the NHPA provides for formal participation of Indian tribes and Native Hawaiian organizations, in practice they are often overlooked or excluded. The result is that the resources important to their identity and culture, and the intangible and tangible cultural heritage associated with them, are not properly recognized or valued by the larger society. They are often not fully considered in mandated preservation processes.

Additional Opportunities for the Preservation Program

Democratizing preservation and encouraging public engagement. Social media, technology, and an expanding perception of historic significance can open the preservation program more broadly to the public. This could have the added benefit of building public support. Community engagement in deciding what is important and how it should be managed can strengthen public and political support and promote diversity throughout the program. Preservation planning and the Section 106 process need to look at ways to make public involvement more effective.

Furthering collaboration and partnership. Increasing recognition of the contributions historic preservation can make to economic development and quality of life can foster greater public-private partnerships that benefit preservation. Focusing on collaborative solutions can redirect regulatory review processes constructively and better reflect federal agency mission needs and program goals. More effective outreach to the business community, to organizations beyond typical preservation constituencies, and to other non-traditional partners could expand preservation’s horizons and potential.

Expanding environmental sustainability. Pioneering work done on the environmental benefits of historic preservation demonstrates its value as a tool for sustainable development as well as its relevance in addressing the challenges of climate change. Historic preservation and concern for historic resources at the community level need to be fully integrated into climate adaptation and resilience planning as well as local and regional sustainability goals in order to maximize the potential environmental and economic benefits.

Enhancing appreciation for heritage through formal and informal education. Integrating cultural heritage awareness into education systems can build a better understanding among young Americans of the importance of history and historic preservation. Targeted youth conservation and service learning programs along with expanded professional and vocational training can lead to careers in preservation and broaden participation in the field.

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