

National Commission Forum 2006- Working Roundtable Reports

When NAPC held its first National Commission Forum in 1998, it broke new ground with facilitated working roundtable sessions. Participants identified challenges surrounding local commission issues and ways to meet them. The report of those sessions is still referenced by local preservation commissions and organizations as they work to advance their programs. Subsequent Forums have followed the working roundtable format with a wider range of topics, facilitators, and panelists.

Forum 2006, held 27 – 30 July in Baltimore Maryland, drew over 400 participants from throughout the United States. Its working roundtables included discussions on a wide range of topics, including ethics, traditionally low-income neighborhoods, planning, new materials, recent past resources, and much more. Participants threw themselves into the discussion and worked together to discover new ways to make preservation work.

Forum participants also let NAPC know what it should be doing to meet its mission to build strong local preservation programs through education, advocacy, and training. Some of those initiatives have already been implemented, like starting a Listserv for our members. NAPC-L went online in late 2006 and quickly became a popular tool connecting NAPC members around the country. (To join NAPC-L, simply send an email to napc@uga.edu, subject line: Join NAPC-L) Other initiatives are still in the planning stages, but will be implemented as resources allow.

The following 2006 National Commission Forum Working Roundtable Reports represent the expertise and experience of Forum participants: people like you working on preservation's front lines. They also represent the special dynamic nature of Forum, the *only* national conference dedicated to local preservation commissions and their issues. Enjoy!

2006 Forum Roundtable Report - Reconciling with the Recent Past

Local commissions increasingly have to deal with recent past resources and the unique challenges of identification, evaluation, and protection that they present.

Two working round tables were held to begin the process of developing an evaluation and designation methodology. This report includes only the most pressing challenges identified and most immediate steps that need to be taken. Work is ongoing.

Current Challenges

- Scope and scale of body of resources
- Lack of standardized survey methodology
- Lack of standardized survey form
- Lack of awareness and appreciation of recent past resources
- Lack of understanding of fifty year rule
- Some commissions impose inflexible age limits which prevent listing of resources younger than fifty years old.

Action Priorities

- Develop standardized survey form
- Standardized approach to addressing recent past resources *based on solid research and proven practice*
- Engage the broader preservation community
- Use recent past resource preservation to introduce new constituents to preservation
- Develop basic information about recent past resources for education and outreach
- Contribute to existing research to create multiple contexts for resources from this era.

What can NAPC do to help?

- Help coordinate development of a standardized survey form
- Incorporate recent past preservation into training programs
- Provide information through *The Alliance Review*
- Develop recent past working group to hone priorities and develop workplan

Local commissions frequently feel isolated from other areas of local government. This session explored ways to make preservation part of the big picture by working with other town/city agencies.

Current Challenges

- How to make Preservation “Sexy”, (in other words how to make preservation appealing, marketable, an issue that is seen as positive for the community and that everyone buys into);
- Preservationist tend to be reactive rather than proactive;
- Lack of support from officials or community, preservation becomes a political issue;
- Preservation department gets lost within city or county government;
- Small budgets and small staffs;
- Split goals, competing agendas, and lack of trust among government departments;
- Staff turf wars and conflicts; lack of ‘good’ staff people; volunteers unable to build influence with elected or appointed officials.

Best Practices

- Advocate for funding; share positives; network; don’t be shy;
- Create proactive planning process by promoting the positive benefits of preservation within city and/or county government, among business owners, and through the general public;
- Create a version of design guideline documents for other city/county government agencies.

What can NAPC do to help?

- Create an advocacy program, especially one which can operate on a state/national level;
- Create a database of preservation plans and instructions for creation;
- Create a program for communities to use to educate/train local officials- as an advocacy tool.

Effective commission operation is a dynamic, ongoing process. This session examined best practice techniques to help your commission be more than just another review board.

Current Challenges

- Commission meetings are too long, improperly conducted and often become heavy-handed;
- Applicants misrepresent a project;
- Applicants confuse design review with design assistance;
- Commission application documents are confusing and overly technical;
- Current staff is expected to perform more work without added support;
- Political pressure is placed on the commission;
- Property owners do not know they are in a district;
- The responsibilities of historic property ownership – including the affect and enforcement of local codes – must be communicated to new and existing owners.

Best Practices

- Have a consent agenda for common and minor applications and use it;
- Elected officials and commission members should participate in regular training sessions;
- Increase the amount of and provide better information online, including online applications;
- Preservation training sessions for realtors in order for them to know about district boundaries and tax benefits of historic properties;
- Respect the applicants and establish good meeting guidelines. Ask a non-voting member (or other individual) to keep order and/or regulate speaker conduct, if needed;
- Visit a site if it has a complex application.
- Hire quality staff;
- Good applicant contact both pre and post commission meeting.
- Don't design at table

What can NAPC do to Help?

- Continue to provide training for commissioners through CAMP and at conferences
- Continue to offer training for Commission Chairs
- Alliance Review articles on Becoming a Friendly Commission
- Create a video of Do's and Don't's for best commission practices

This session of issues and ideas looked at design review to identify the best tools and techniques available for the next forty years.

Current Challenges

- False/erroneous design interpretation, varied contexts and varied materials within a community;
- Fluid mandates;
- Market forces and economics stifling creative design (homogenization);
- New materials;
- New Urbanism and the creation of false history;
- Old-timers vs. newcomers;
- Suburban malls and strip malls (too much 'car');
- Transient populations with no or little community roots.

Best Practices

- Develop partnerships with related professions (ex: AIA; contractors);
- Education and training (ex: NPS training sessions);
- Encourage/demand experiential learning at design schools;
- Encourage humanities background for future preservationists;
- Emphasize/promote local connections to the National Register;
- Remember that we can manage change ("get our groove back")

Reviewing infill projects for architectural compatibility that doesn't create a false sense of history can be difficult and contentious. This session explored the difficulty and creative ways it can be addressed.

Current Challenges

- Dealing with neighborhood expectations;
- Need quality/creative design and materials (getting the details right);
- No guidelines or standards describing how much change is tolerable;
- No guidelines or standards showing quality infill projects;
- Public and commissions cannot judge compatible design;

Best Practices

- Create a set of standards for your community;
- Create an image library of good contemporary designs, and explain why they are compatible. Learn what is available (materials and consultants).

What can NAPC do to help?

- NAPC website of approved infill projects. (Wikipedia approach suggested whereby NAPC members can add suggestions to the website.)

2006 Forum Roundtable Report -

Keeping the Peace: Working with Developers and Architects

The acrimonious relationship that sometimes exists between preservation commissions, architects, and developers isn't necessary. This session looked for common ground so that all three could be preservation allies.

Current Challenges

- Communication: Little information exchanged between preservation offices, developers and architects; lack of information from building code officials; developers and architects unwilling to share information with the review board.
- Developers get information too late in their process;
- Allowances/variances (give something to one person and everyone wants it);
- Antagonism between historic preservation and development;
- Commission/review board decisions overruled by higher authorities;
- Developers and architects who do not understand the review process;
- Developers not being aware of tax incentives;
- Need to recognize the multiple party involvement in development projects (ex: architects answer to both the design review board and their client);
- Redevelopment projects and zoning ordinances may clash with preservation (conflicting agendas such as a desire for higher density).

Best Practices

- Early consultation with architects and developers;
- Add professional expertise to the commission.
- Build Allies: Make presentations to city council; find advocates in development; network.
- Make site visits to understand issues;
- Expedite the review process by having the review board thoroughly informed before the meeting (clear comprehensive agendas, e-mails, postings, committee meetings);
- Provide timely responses to developers and architects ("A fast 'no' is better than a long 'yes'").
- Development Review Team, where preservationist are at the table with other building officials

What can NAPC do to help?

- Provide a resource center of good projects;
- Educate people to present options;
- Provide architectural education credits for NAPC training;
- Provide a network of advocates; case studies; success stories.

2006 Forum Roundtable Report -

Facing Reality: Preservation in Traditionally Low-Income Neighborhoods

Preservation in traditionally low-income neighborhoods requires creative solutions and partnerships. This session explored different approaches to the issue and the role preservation commissions can play.

Current Challenges

- Absentee landlords;
- Attracting small businesses and first-time homebuyers to low income areas versus large-scale development or 'flippers';
- Commissions not enforcing or working with developers to restore/improve historic housing stock;
- Complicated programs;
- Creating balance: mixed income neighborhoods not encouraged by economics or planning/code;
- Defining 'hardship';
- Developers or real estate investors flipping properties at a higher price and decreasing the amount of affordable housing;
- Friendly financing for full-time, low-income residents or residents with sketchy credit histories so that they can remain in a neighborhood;
- Government not addressing vacant properties, demolition or demolition by neglect;
- Low income neighborhood residents do not want preservation ("old is bad") or see it as elitist;
- Low or selective enforcement of existing planning and zoning controls/codes;
- Rising property values creating burdensome property tax increases for low income or elderly residents;
- Substandard construction and/or inspectors not enforcing construction codes;
- Tax credits encouraging gentrification and pushing out original and/or lower income residents;
- Tourism overtaking the working class.

Best Practices

- Better define or add hardship clauses to tax code;
- Create a primary residence easement program;
- Educate residents and developers about federal and state incentives;
- Encourage property tax freeze for low-income, owner-occupied residences;
- Government mandated replacement of affordable housing when existing stock is lost to development;
- Revolving funds;
- Strong commission and/or CLG to assist with enforcement;
- Work with non-profits.

What can NAPC do to help?

- Online clearinghouse / website showing best practices and examples from around the country;
- Provide technical assistance with advocacy, legal issues, marketing, communication techniques, grant writing and financial programs;
- Training for affordable housing organizations (ex: tax incentives; quality construction);
- Training for developers and real estate investors as to what constitutes a quality rehabilitation;
- Use guidelines for low-income housing.

2006 Forum Roundtable Report -

New Materials Mayhem: Determining Sustainability

Struggling with requests for Hardiplank, fiberglass cornices, and metal clad wood windows? How about the cementitious material for clay tile roofs and stone walls? This session devised ways to quell the mayhem.

Current Challenges

- Commissions have a difficult time evaluating all of the new products continually coming on the market that are advertised as replacements for original materials. The new products are advertised promising more energy efficient, less maintenance, less expensive, etc.
- Insurance companies do not want to pay for homeowners to use the required materials needed to repair/renovate historic homes. Therefore, commissions need to be informed about new materials. Need technical information and commissioner/staff training. We cannot educate applicants on the use of new materials until we understand their cost, performance and usage (visual criteria).
- Commissions have approved products that turn out to be a complete disaster. How do you pass that information on, so other commissions don't make the same mistake?
- By insisting on replacing like with like, Commissioners are cast as insensitive ogres who don't care about energy efficiency, the cost to the homeowner, the need for continual painting, etc. This sometimes causes ill will with citizens and City Councils. How do Commissions create a positive image in the community while adhering to preservation standards?

Best Practices

- Exchange basic technical/cost information with other commissions via blog or listserve;
- Michigan Historic Preservation Network offers a good example of new materials training and information (www.mhpn.org);
- Provide access to staff and commissioner "how-to" training sessions, so commissioners are familiar with the proper and correct processes for repair.
- Review codes for preservation requirements and energy efficiency conflicts, and use alternate codes such as the Rehabilitation Code.
- Conduct periodic workshops for commissioners on evaluating new materials.

What can NAPC do to help?

- *Provide a bullet point, easy to understand, evaluation of materials. Most information is too technical for commissioners and they just want the basic talking points.*
- A 100% and enthusiastic request for NAPC to mandate that the National Trust place the American window on its endangered list.
- *Need network for educational materials (case studies, new materials, failure rates, etc.)*
- Partner with Preservation Trades Network (www.PTN.org).

2006 Forum Roundtable Report - Tiny Towns, Big Issues

Commissions serving towns under 5,000 in population face unique challenges – economic pressures, lack of public awareness, lack of staff – and must find creative solutions to meet them. This session identified those challenges and solutions.

Current Challenges

- Expertise not available;
- Government too busy or apathetic toward enforcement;
- Lack of education encouraging misinformation;
- Newcomers telling old timers what to do;
- No preservation plan;
- No commission staff;
- Perception of favoritism, (because everyone knows everyone):
- Poor or no media relations;
- Property rights “über alles”;
- Public questioning guidelines and decisions; refusal to follow COA legal procedures.

Best Practices

- Create a preservation plan;
- Create user-friendly brochures/public information pieces and tell public that they exist (local paper and radio);
- Hire a commission staff person or utilize a ‘circuit rider’ system for small communities.
- Local History for Elementary Schools to cultivate a preservation ethic

What can NAPC do to help?

- Continue CAMP, Forum and publishing materials for our use;
- Create a listserve or blog for small towns in order for them to be connected.
- Provide resources of good models and success stories