

Frequent Asked Questions Proposed Virginia Manor Local Historic District

How did the idea come about for the proposed Virginia Manor Local Historic District?

Mt. Lebanon's 2013 comprehensive plan includes an important objective: *"to maintain Mt. Lebanon's character while accommodating new growth, redevelopment and evolving housing needs."* An action item aimed at achieving that objective states that Mt. Lebanon should *"work with the historic preservation board to establish local historic districts, with emphasis on parts of the community eligible for National Register of Historic Places designation."* That action plan was welcomed by the historic preservation board, which around the same time was working to carry out its three- to-five-year plan. The board had submitted an application to the National Parks Service nominating a district of more than 4,000 Mt. Lebanon properties to the National Register of Historic Places and in 2014 the nomination, including 92 Virginia Manor properties, was approved. With that goal accomplished, the historic preservation board's next step was to create a plan for Mt. Lebanon to establish Local Historic Districts. Mt. Lebanon's comprehensive plan and the historic preservation board long-range plan were established independently, but both expressed intent to look into Local Historic Districts.

Why was Virginia Manor selected? In 2013, a group of about 30 Virginia Manor property owners sought help from the historic preservation board in maintaining the character of their neighborhood, which they felt was being threatened by some changes that were insensitive to the existing architecture and landscape. The group recognized that change is inevitable and important, if Mt. Lebanon is to continue to attract young families with modern lifestyles; however, they wanted to be sure that changes made would be respectful of original architectural styles, scale and building materials, thereby protecting the charm and authenticity of the neighborhood. This turned out to be a good opportunity for the historic preservation board to promote the drafting of guidelines and an ordinance that could serve as a template for any Mt. Lebanon neighborhood that might in the future seek help, and the Commission offered its support. This was not the first time homeowners (from various neighborhoods) had asked Mt. Lebanon for a preservation ordinance, but it was the first time since the designation of our National Register Historic District, which provided the impetus for moving forward.

How is a Local Historic District different from a National Register District?

The National Register of Historic Places puts no strictures on the properties it honors; owners may make any changes they wish to the buildings, including tearing them down. A Local Historic District, created by a local ordinance, is an effective way of protecting a community's historic resources because it can have an impact on the demolition, renovation and in-fill of private property in order to prevent the loss of historic resources. These districts often are created in communities after the loss of a significant property, but they should be established before that happens. Local Historic Districts allow changes—they are not meant to prevent all demolition, new construction or development. Their intent is to shepherd changes and additions that are sensitive to and congruous with the historic aesthetic of the district. In a Local Historic District, a historical architectural review board (HARB) is appointed to serve as a resource to property owners who are planning additions or new construction.

What is a Historical Architectural Review Board (HARB)?

A historical architectural review board (HARB) is a public body created by a local historic district ordinance that reviews proposed new construction, demolitions and exterior alterations to structures within a historic district. Its members are available to help people make sure their renovation plans will enhance their property and retain the character of the neighborhood. In addition to helping homeowners develop their plans, the HARB reviews the proposed plans to see that they reflect mandatory design guidelines that have been developed with input from residents. It then recommends that the municipal commission accept or reject the changes. If the proposed work is acceptable, the commission issues a certificate of appropriateness, which is required before work begins. The following professionals must serve on the HARB: one registered architect, one licensed real estate broker and one building inspector. Remaining members are citizens with a demonstrated interest in and knowledge of historic preservation.

What are design guidelines?

Design guidelines are a tool to help property owners maintain the historic character of their homes or other properties and are specific to a historic district. Design guidelines also serve as a framework within which a historical architectural review board (HARB) can evaluate proposed alterations. Design guidelines can be as specific or as broad as the community desires. Mt. Lebanon's intent is to develop design guidelines that pertain to large changes and provide property owners with flexibility in their choices. Design guidelines can be either voluntary or mandatory or a combination of the two. What is enforceable in the guidelines is determined by the enabling local historic district ordinance. Design guidelines and ordinances that might result are unique to the neighborhoods that create them, but they typically cover a few broad concepts that can help protect historic character: massing (design and scale of additions, rooflines, new construction, etc.), materials (types of materials used for rehabilitation and/or new construction), siting (how new construction is located in relation to other buildings and the streetscape) and demolition (the demolition of a historic character-defining structure or feature.)

Why does the proposed Local Historic District extend beyond the portion of Virginia Manor that is included in the National Register Historic District? Mt. Lebanon's National Register Historic District is based on the entire municipality's history as an early automobile suburb, but much like the rest of Mt. Lebanon outside the National Register Historic District, Virginia Manor's history is broader and deeper than an association with that specific history. In other words, the significance of Virginia Manor's history and architecture is not limited to the very specific history defined by the National Register Historic District. The reason some areas of Virginia Manor subdivision are not in the National Register Historic District is because some houses were not built within the period of significance defined for National Register nomination. Fortunately, the newer homes continued the tradition of original one-of-a-kind homes and for the most part are constructed with top-notch materials and beautiful architectural detail. The owners of newer homes clearly take as much pride in their properties and are as concerned about maintaining their real estate values as are the owners of the older houses. They would benefit from being in the Local Historic District as much as owners of the older houses.

What is the benefit in being part of a Local Historic District?

Benefits include maintaining the special sense of place found in Virginia Manor, which is by no means assured unless thoughtful steps are taken to ensure that sense of place is never threatened. Comparative studies converge on a few key findings: Historic district designation typically increases residential property values by 5-35 percent per decade over the values in similar, undesignated neighborhoods; Both nationally designated historic districts and locally designated historic districts outperform similar, undesignated neighborhoods, but districts that carry both local and national designation experience the highest relative increases in property values. The values of newer properties within designated historic districts increase along with those of older

properties. Local Historic District designation decreases investor uncertainty and insulates property values from wild swings in the housing market.

Would a Local Historic District for Virginia Manor benefit Mt. Lebanon at large?

The Virginia Manor materials will be a template to be used by other subdivisions that may wish to create design guidelines or become local historic districts. The design guidelines may vary from district to district.

Who is guiding this process and what is the timeline? T & B Planning, Inc. is a consulting firm working with a steering committee composed of municipal staff members, the historic preservation board and some Virginia Manor residents to create design guidelines and a draft ordinance. The firm was selected as the result of a typical RFP process. They have researched Virginia Manor history, walked every street and photographed every house in order to get a good idea of what gives the neighborhood character or could be threatened by insensitive change. They have met with Virginia Manor residents at two public meetings and have incorporated residents' suggestions, including some made at the most recent meeting, Thursday, August 13, into the guidelines. The draft design guidelines are available online at www.mtlebanon.org. All Virginia Manor property owners were notified by letter of the public meetings with the consultants, including the final meetings, which will be held Thursday, September 10 at 7 p.m. in the municipal building. Following this meeting, the consultants will conclude their work and the draft guidelines and ordinance will go to the Mt. Lebanon Commissioners for consideration. Throughout fall 2015, the commission will review the draft guidelines and draft ordinance with a goal of concluding this project by the end of 2015. Prior to taking any action, the Commission is required to hold two public hearings.

Is this legal?

Yes. There are many local historic districts around the United States, including several in the Pittsburgh area. You can learn more about the legality of local historic districts from these cases decided by the US Supreme Court: Village of Euclid v. Ambler (1926); Berman v. Parker (1954); Penn Central Transportation Company v. City of New York (1978).

What is the expected long-term cost of the ordinance? The municipality will analyze the long-term needs and costs for implementing the ordinance and providing staff assistance to the HARB. In large part, those needs will depend on the ordinance's final form. One known cost will be the need to provide minor annual or semiannual training for the staff and the HARB members to ensure they remain current on best practices and new resources. Cost of the consultant, \$24,645, is a one-time fee for the design guidelines, meetings and draft ordinance.

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