

DRAFT 12/2002

“How to Write a Historic District Study Committee Report”

Purpose of the Report

The purpose of the historic district study committee report is to establish the legal basis for the creation of a local historic district. Historical data about a proposed district is collected, analyzed, summarized and presented in the report in a clear and concise manner to illustrate the historic significance of a district. The report should justify why a local historic district is being created and establish the boundaries for the district. The report serves as a source of information for a variety of audiences including:

- the historic district commission as it fulfills its duties as the regulatory body for the district
- planners when decisions on development projects are made within the community;
- professional consultants hired to do historic reviews for federally funded projects; and
- teachers and others in the community interested in using the information to create educational programs about a community's heritage.

Components of the Report

Section 399.203 of Public Act 169 of 1970 (PA 169), as amended, *Michigan's Local Historic Districts Act*, requires that a historic district study committee report contain, at a minimum, six (6) items: 1) the charge of the committee; 2) the composition of the committee membership; 3) the name of the proposed historic district(s); 4) the written and visual boundaries of the district; 5) the history of the proposed district; 6) the significance of the district highlighted by information on a number of the individual resources within the district that relate to that significance. Over the years, the State Historic Preservation Office has found it appropriate to include additional information in the report and in August 2002, the Michigan Historical Center established criteria that requires the following information to be included in the historic district study committee report: a boundary justification, a list of historic and a list of non-historic resources in the district, photographs of the resources highlighted in the report, the total count of the number of resources in the proposed district and percentage of historic to non-historic resources. Below is an explanation of the type of information it would be helpful to include in each component of the report.

Charge of the Committee

The local unit of government, through a resolution, must appoint the members of the historic district study committee. In the study committee report, the charge should contain the following information:

- Name of the municipal body that appointed the historic district study committee
- Date the resolution to appoint the historic district study committee was adopted

- A short verbal description of the general geographic area the committee was asked to study

Composition of Committee Membership

The name of each study committee member should be listed in the report. Because PA 169 requires that the majority of study committee members have a “demonstrated interest” in historic preservation, it is a good idea to show how committee members fulfill this requirement by listing their historic preservation interests and affiliations. This need not be a lengthy description. For example, the study committee member list could look something like this:

John Doe, member, Elk County Historical Society
LeeAnn Pratt, architect, Smith and Wells, Inc.
Tom Baker, property owner, Lincoln Heights Historic District
Sue Richards, planner, Elk City
Eileen Jones, compiled a comprehensive history of Elk City for the city's Centennial celebration
Brian Harris, member, Elk County Historic District Commission
Todd Baron, archaeologist, Elk College

The Historic District(s) Studied

This is simply the name(s) given to the proposed district(s) that result from the study. For example, “Elk Park Historic District” or the “Adolph Stephenson Farmstead Historic District.” District names are typically based on the historic name associated with the property or area.

The Boundaries of the Proposed District(s)

PA 169 requires that the study committee report include both a written boundary description and a visual depiction of the boundary on a map. The purpose of the maps is to enable readers of the report to determine which individual properties in a given area are or are not included in the district. Thus, the maps should be of a level of detail and quality where this can clearly be seen. Sometimes, more than one map may need to be included in the report.

Verbal Boundary Description

The verbal boundary description should be a legal description of the district boundary. The description should be written so that federal, state, and city planning agencies or a property owner can clearly identify the district's limits and what properties are included in it. Depending on the size of the district the verbal description of the district could be:

- Legal parcel number
- Block and lot number
- Metes and bounds, or
- Dimensions of a parcel of land, reckoning from a landmark, such as a natural or cultural feature. The description should begin at a fixed reference point and then follow the perimeter of the district, including dimensions and directions.

While parcel numbers can be used, we do not recommend that they be the sole source of identification for the district. Parcels can be merged or eliminated which can cause confusion when trying to identify a district's boundaries in the future. If parcel numbers are used, we recommend also including a metes and bounds description of the district's boundaries.

Visual Boundary Description

The visual boundaries of the proposed district should be clearly and boldly drawn on a map so they are easily distinguishable in the original report and on any copies that are made of the map(s). The final map should be of a size and format that will allow it to be bound within the body of the report: 8 ½ by 11 inches for most districts or 11 x 17 inches with 2 vertical folds for larger districts. Each map should include all of the following:

- Name of the proposed district
- Name of the community and county
- Date the map was created
- Key identifying any symbols used on the map
- North arrow
- All streets in the proposed district with their names clearly labeled
- Street addresses for all properties in the proposed district
- Lot Lines
- Footprints or an outline representation (rectangles or squares) of the individual resources surveyed in the proposed district
- The boundary of the proposed district clearly drawn in a bold line on the map.

For larger districts, a series of maps may be required, one that shows the location of the proposed district within the community and others that show smaller areas of the district in more detail. For example, if you are designating a large district that includes 200 residential properties and a park, you would include an overview map of the whole district that shows its location within the larger community; a series of maps each showing a portion of the district and enabling the reader to see street addresses and number, until the entire district has been depicted; and a site map of the park indicating the location of existing historic features, such as paths, fountains, historic plantings, and monuments. For a farmstead, it may be necessary to draw a site plan to indicate where historically significant features such as orchards, farm fields, silos, barns and outbuildings are located in relation to the farmhouse.

Boundary Justification

The report should include a boundary justification that addresses each directional boundary of the proposed district. Boundaries should be justified by using three guidelines: geographical features, the historic significance of the district, and/or the integrity of the resources in the proposed district. An example:

“The northern district boundary is the Bendy River; the eastern boundary is I-59 which, when it was constructed in 1957, bisected the original plat for the neighborhood; Elm Street was chosen as the southern boundary because it marks a change in housing types from a concentration of early 20th century two-story frame houses to the north and a neighborhood of post-World War II brick ranch houses to the south; Green Street was chosen as the western

boundary as there is a significant loss of material integrity in the resources beyond this point.”

For a single resource property you may simply state something like, “The boundaries are those of the original lot platted in 1882.”

History of the Proposed District

The purpose of the history is to place the district and its resource(s) within its historic context at the local, state, and national level, as need be. The historic context is simply a compilation of the significant time periods, the significant people, and the important trends that shaped the development of the proposed district. The history should be based on facts that can be documented through primary and secondary sources. Beware of including oral traditions that have been passed down for generations but that cannot be substantiated. When writing the report, existing resources in the district should be linked directly to the district’s historic significance. Here is a shortened example of a history statement for a residential district.

“In the early 1900’s Middletown became a center for the development of the early automobile. Travis Jones, who’s Jonesmobile became the most popular car in America between 1910 and 1930, built a factory at 915 Washington Boulevard in 1910 (demolished 1977). The construction of the factory resulted in a boom in population for Middletown as workers left the surrounding farms to take advantage of the high wages offered in the Jones factory. To house these workers, the Oakdale neighborhood was constructed by Dorian Blue, a prominent real estate agent in the city. The Oakdale neighborhood is made up of single story, gable front frame houses that line Oak, Elm, Water and Front Streets between Washington Boulevard and the Green River at the southeastern corner of the district. The homes have little ornamentation but are distinguished by their pressed tin roofs. This was the first subdivision developed in Middletown in response to the needs of the rapidly expanding automobile industry.

In addition to the Jones factory, two other car manufacturers built plants in Middletown between 1904 and 1930. The Casey Steam-Powered automobile was only in production for two years (1904-1906) and did not have a big impact on the development of the automobile or the city of Middletown. However, its founder, James Casey, become Vice President of Jones Automobile in 1912 and was responsible for the design of the company’s most popular car, the Model B. Casey was also a founding member of the Good Roads Movement in Michigan and worked to develop a paved highway between Middletown and Detroit. While the Casey factory building no longer exists, James Casey’s commanding stone Colonial Revival home designed by Grand Rapids architect Samuel Osgood, is located at 12 Addison Street. Addison Street is the stately avenue of estate homes that fronts the Bendy River on the western edge of the district. Casey Park, located in the northeast section of the district was created on land donated to the city of Middletown by James Casey in 1923. Casey hired the nationally known landscape architect, Jens Jensen, to develop the plan for the park.”

If individual properties in the district are significant because of a specific architectural style, they should be discussed in terms of similar resources in the proposed district or in the community overall. You do not need to write lengthy descriptions of

architectural styles. Instead, provide the distinguishing characteristics of the specific property that shows how it is representative of the style. An example:

“The Ira George House at 15 Lincoln Avenue is an excellent example of the Italianate style. The 2-story structure has a square floor plan and is distinguished by its decorative full-length front porch, cupola, round arch windows and large, ornamental roof brackets. This high style structure is one of only 6 Italianates found in the district and the only one constructed of brick. ”

Do not fall into the trap, as many communities do, of only explaining the significance of the proposed district in terms of its architecture. It is important to include information on the significant people and events that shaped the district as well.

PA 169 states that the report must highlight individual resources within the proposed district. We recommend that you include a representative example of *all* the property types found in the district. For example, if a predominately residential district includes a school, church, park or commercial structure, these resources should be highlighted in the report along with a variety of the residential homes. Be sure that you include representative examples of the property type found in the majority in the district— don't just concentrate on the unique or special properties. For example, if the majority of the homes are bungalows or simple upright and wing homes, include one or more as representative examples in addition to highlighting the high style or more unusual resources--don't just focus on the district's high style architecture.

Statement of Significance

Each resource needs to be evaluated using the evaluation criteria for the National Register of Historic Places. There are four primary criteria:

- Criterion A: Association with Significant Events
- Criterion B: Association with Significant People
- Criterion C: Design/Construction Significance
- Criterion D: Information Potential

In the report, state the criteria that the district meets (it may be more than one) and how it meets the criteria. For example, “The Oakville District is significant under National Register Criterion A for its association with the developing automobile industry; Criterion B for its association with early automobile pioneer and former Michigan Governor John Doe who lived there from 1897 to 1922 and Criterion C as a representative example of late 19th century vernacular architecture.”

Photographs

Remember when taking photographs of resources in the district that you are documenting the way the district looks at the time it was established. This visual record will become a useful tool for the historic district commission when they are reviewing proposed work to a property. They will be able to tell what alterations already existed at the time the district was created. Be sure the resource is unobstructed by trees or cars and that architectural details are clearly visible in the photograph. Photographs should be oblique shots that encompass 2 sides of the building. For multiple resource districts, take at least one photograph of each individual resource. If there are other features on a property that contribute to its historic significance such as a carriage barn, entry gateposts, a historic fence or

garden, photographs should be taken of each feature, if possible. Representative streetscape shots should also be taken to show how the resources relate to each other in terms of set back, vegetation, etc. For single resource districts, we recommend documenting all exterior elevations of the building as well as any special or outstanding features.

Resource Count and Percentage

Historic resources are typically those that are 50 years of age or older, unless the resource is proven to have exceptional significance. Historic resources must retain their integrity—the physical features that represent the period in which the property was built and/or its period of historic significance. Integrity is determined by looking at seven qualities: location (is the property on its original location), design, setting, materials, workmanship, feeling, and association (with people and events).

Each resource in the proposed district should be evaluated to determine if it is a historic (contributing) or non-historic (non-contributing) resource. To make that determination look at the resource in terms of how it relates to the historic context that was developed, the National Register Criteria for Eligibility and the resource's integrity. PA 169 requires that a percentage of historic to non-historic properties be developed. It is a good idea to include this in the study committee report to show the study committee has met this obligation.

Lists of Historic and Non-Historic Properties

It is recommended that a list of the historic properties by street name and address and a list of the non-historic properties by street name and address in the district be included in the report. This will greatly facilitate the use of the report by the historic district commission, building officials, and local planners. It will also enable residents to know if a particular property qualifies for preservation tax credit incentives.

Bibliography

Each report should include a bibliography of the historic resources used to develop the history of the district. The bibliography can be presented in any standard, accepted format such as the *Chicago Manual of Style*.