

COMMON QUESTIONS

about the proposed Flat Rock Historic District

You may have questions about what a local historic district actually means for your home. The answers below address the concerns we hear most often from Flat Rock property owners. The short version: you keep full use of your home, your taxes don't go up because of improvements, and property values in designated districts tend to go **up**, not down.

YOUR MONEY

Will my property taxes go up if my home value increases?

No. Michigan law protects you on two fronts. **Proposal A of 1994** caps annual taxable-value increases at the rate of inflation, so designation itself will not push your tax bill up. And the **Mathieu-Gast Act** (MCL 211.27(2)) specifically bars an assessor from counting ordinary repair, replacement, or maintenance toward your cash value until the property sells. Fix up your home now, and you only pay on the added value if and when you sell.

Will designation hurt my property value?

No — the pattern is the opposite. Studies from Michigan, Texas, Georgia, Wisconsin, and Virginia comparing designated districts with similar non-designated neighborhoods find that values in local historic districts do not fall. Most often they rise, sometimes dramatically. A striking Michigan example: the **Heritage Hill Historic District in Grand Rapids** — a neighborhood with whole blocks once slated for demolition under urban renewal — saw property values climb roughly **1,200%** between 1974 and 2002 after designation stabilized the area.

CONTROL OVER YOUR HOME

Will I need permission for every little repair?

No. The **Flat Rock Historic Preservation Commission (HPC)** only reviews projects that change your home's exterior appearance. Under Michigan's Local Historic Districts Act, **ordinary maintenance** — routine upkeep that keeps your home looking the same from the street — is exempt. Replacing a rotted clapboard with one of the same wood, width, and thickness: ordinary maintenance, no review needed. Swapping 20-inch porch posts for slim 5-inch ones: that changes the look, and does need review. *Flat Rock's Design Guidelines (in draft)* will spell out additional examples for local homes.

Will the HPC tell me what color to paint my house?

No. The Flat Rock Historic District does not regulate paint colors. Paint is a temporary finish that doesn't affect original historic material, and color choices remain entirely your own.

Do I have to restore my house to how it originally looked?

No. The HPC applies the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for **rehabilitation** — not restoration. Rehabilitation means preserving what's historically significant while keeping your home comfortable and useful for modern living. Flat Rock's Design Guidelines will spell out how rehabilitation applies to local homes. Museum-quality restoration to a single original date is a different treatment and does not apply to homes in a local district.

Is work inside my house reviewed?

No. The HPC reviews exterior work only. One wrinkle: if an interior change will alter the outside — say, closing up a window or moving a doorway — you may be asked to show the interior plan as context for the exterior change. The interior itself is not being judged.

Can the HPC make me fix something I don't want to fix?

No — with one narrow exception. The HPC only reviews work *you* choose to initiate. It cannot order you to paint, repair, or replace anything. The exception is demolition by neglect: if a property is allowed to deteriorate toward collapse, the Commission can step in.

MATERIALS AND THE DETAILS

What if my house already has vinyl siding?

Many homes in the proposed district already have vinyl siding that was installed before designation. That existing vinyl is part of your home's documented pre-district condition, and **maintaining or repairing it is permitted** — you are not being asked to strip it off. Flat Rock's Design Guidelines (in draft) will discourage *new* vinyl installation on homes that still have their original wood siding, because the installation typically covers or removes historic trim and details, can trap moisture, and tends to need replacement in about ten years. If your home still has wood, repairing and painting it is usually the better path — wood siding, properly maintained, commonly lasts five to ten times longer than vinyl.

What about my replacement windows and other modern features?

The same principle applies. The HPC reviews *new* work, not existing conditions — so replacement windows, aluminum trim, modern doors, and other non-original features already in place at designation are part of your home's documented pre-district condition and stay as they are. Maintaining and repairing them is permitted.

Windows come up most often: if your home has vinyl or modern wood replacement windows, you are not being asked to put back original-style sashes, and no one will force you to start a replacement project. When you do eventually plan a full window replacement, the Design Guidelines (Section 4.3) ask that new windows match the originals in material, profile, size, and pane configuration; storm windows are recommended as an alternative. The HPC walks through the details with each owner during the COA review.

Can a building be demolished?

Yes, in specific situations. The HPC can issue a **Notice to Proceed** for demolition when a building poses a public safety hazard, when keeping it would block a major public-benefit project, when retention would create genuine financial hardship caused by something outside the owner's control, or when the building has lost its historic integrity.

HOW THE COMMISSION WORKS

What is a Certificate of Appropriateness?

It is the permit the HPC issues when your proposed work meets the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Rehabilitation *and* Flat Rock's Design Guidelines. When a project comes before the Commission, it has four options: approve it (Certificate of Appropriateness), table it for more information, deny it, or issue a Notice to Proceed when work is inappropriate but necessary for safety or a clear public benefit.

Can I opt out of being in the district?

No. Michigan's Attorney General opinion (Opinion 6919) holds that a community cannot require owner consent for inclusion in a local historic district, and federal guidelines forbid cutting "donut holes" to intentionally exclude individual properties. District boundaries are set based on geography, the historic significance of the area, and the integrity of its buildings — not on ownership or politics.

What happens if I do work without approval?

Michigan's Local Historic Districts Act allows fines of up to **\$5,000** for inappropriate work, and the HPC can require the work to be undone or modified to meet the Standards and Flat Rock's Design Guidelines. Getting a Certificate of Appropriateness before you start avoids all of this — and the Commission staff is there to help you plan.

YOUR VOICE MATTERS

Come learn more and ask questions at a public information meeting:

May 7 • 5–7 PM • Flat Rock City Hall

If you support designation, please sign and return your **Property Owner Statement of Support** — these forms will be presented to City Council when they consider the proposed district.

Questions? Reach out to the Flat Rock Historic District Study Committee.