

## MEMORANDUM

TO: Chapel Hill Historic District Commission

FROM: Britany Waddell, Planning Director  
Anya Grahn-Federmack, Principal Planner  
Charnika Harrell, Planner II

SUBJECT: Historic District Design Standards Discussion

DATE: June 13, 2023

### PURPOSE

The Historic District Commission (HDC) has expressed interest in evaluating the [\*Chapel Hill Historic Districts Design Principles & Standards\*](#)<sup>1</sup>, adopted in 2021, to identify areas that may lack clarity or cause confusion.

### COMMISSIONER HOMEWORK

Staff requests that Commissioners identify three (3) specific Administrative Approval items and/or Design Standards that have challenged them in the past to discuss at the June 13, 2023, HDC meeting. Commissioners are encouraged to take photographs of recently completed projects within the three local historic districts to help illustrate their questions and concerns with the specific Design Standards. Photographs should be submitted to staff prior to the meeting. Staff will gather the photographs and present these at the meeting. This is an opportunity for Commissioners to consider how the Design Standards have been applied to recent projects within the districts.

When identifying Design Standards, consider:

- Are there specific work items in the Design Standards that you believe staff should or should not have authority to approve?
- What Design Standard(s) does the Commission frequently debate?
- Are there Design Standards that prevent or limit creative design solutions?
- Are there things you wish the Design Standards would or would not do?

Staff has identified the following preliminary list of items that the Commission has expressed interest in reviewing:

- Defining “Substantial Change” for administrative approvals
- Design Standard 4.8.2 and the appropriateness of side additions
- Fences:
  - Design Standard 1.3.8 and the appropriateness of split rail fences
  - Congruity of fences enclosing yards and the “open” feeling of the historic districts
- Design Standards 3.1.7 and 4.9 related to dormers located on historic facades
- Deck railing designs
- Flexibility of introducing contemporary improvements in backyard designs

Commissioners may choose to build from this list.

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<sup>1</sup>[https://townhall.townofchapelhill.org/large\\_docs/historic\\_district/CH%20HD%20Design%20Principles%20and%20Standards.pdf](https://townhall.townofchapelhill.org/large_docs/historic_district/CH%20HD%20Design%20Principles%20and%20Standards.pdf)

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## BACKGROUND

The State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) awarded the Town of Chapel Hill a Certified Local Government (CLG) grant to create the *Chapel Hill Historic Districts Design Principles & Standards* in 2019. Any changes to the document require review by SHPO to ensure they are in keeping with the [Secretary of the Interiors Standards for Rehabilitation](#)<sup>2</sup>. In 2021, the Historic District Commission (HDC) adopted the Design Standards, replacing the 2002 [Design Guidelines for Chapel Hill Historic Districts](#)<sup>3</sup>.

The Design Standards ensure that alterations are not incongruent with the special character of Chapel Hill's three (3) local historic districts:

- Franklin-Rosemary Historic District
- Cameron-McCauley Historic District
- Gimghoul Historic District

The HDC reviews the following, which are included in the design review process:

- Exterior alterations,
- Changes in exterior materials,
- New construction,
- Additions,
- Significant site changes, and
- The relocation or demolition of historic buildings (see [Land Use Management Ordinance \(LUMO\) 3.6.2\(e\)\(4\)](#)<sup>4</sup>).

The following are not included in the design review process:

- Interior alterations,
- Routine maintenance, and
- Minor repairs to the building's exterior that do not change its appearance and materials.

## NEXT STEPS

The Commission considers the Design Standards to be a living document. As such, staff has agreed to make minor changes and updates to the Design Standards on a periodic basis.

This is the first conversation to evaluate the effectiveness of the Design Standards since their adoption. The purpose of this conversation is to identify those sections of the Design Standards that are concerning or unclear. Next steps may include:

1. Further discussions around specific Design Standards or educational training related to specific work items.
2. Commissioners conducting a photographic survey of the districts to identify key characteristics that contribute to the special character of each district. (More information about this initiative will be shared at a later date.)
3. Staff returning to the Commission with proposed amendments to the Design Standards, following review by the SHPO.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ncdcr.gov/about/history/division-historical-resources/state-historic-preservation-office/restoration-5>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.townofchapelhill.org/home/showdocument?id=2405>

<sup>4</sup> [https://library.municode.com/nc/chapel\\_hill/codes/code\\_of\\_ordinances?nodeId=CO\\_APXALAU\\_SMA\\_ART3\\_ZODIUSDIST\\_3\\_6OVDI](https://library.municode.com/nc/chapel_hill/codes/code_of_ordinances?nodeId=CO_APXALAU_SMA_ART3_ZODIUSDIST_3_6OVDI)