

How are District Boundary Lines Established?

Where historic district boundaries are drawn can depend on several factors which preservationists, planners, elected officials and neighborhood advocates and others working to protect a sense of place must consider. Common factors include:

- **Historical Factors:** Boundaries of an original settlement or early planned community or neighborhood
- **Visual Factors:** Changes in the visual character of an area, topography, gateways, entrances, and vistas
- **Physical Factors:** Railroads, highways, expressways; urban spaces; rivers, marshlands and other natural features and major changes in land use
- **Surveyed Lines:** Legal boundary lines, property lines, streets and rights-of-way
- **Political Considerations:** Opinions of local elected officials, property owners, and citizens! While owner-consent is not necessary and shouldn't be required for local designation, much confusion and suspicion surround the local designation process. This is why educating the public each step of the way is important, so they know the benefits of local designation and not just the prolific myths.

Determining where boundaries should be drawn begins with a survey. A local district survey does not need to be as detailed as required for a National Register of Historic Places nomination. A simple “windshield survey” – meaning what one can glean from driving (or walking!) all the streets in town – will suffice. A binder with photographs, addresses and brief descriptions of each property’s architectural or historical significance (where applicable) is an acceptable survey method. But, you don’t know what needs to be protected until you know what you have! Two good sources to learn about historic buildings are “House Types in Georgia” – find on gashpo.org – and Virginia and Lee McAlester’s, *A Field Guide to American Houses*. [Ibid: 0-394-73969-8]

Common questions that arise when considering where to draw district boundaries are:

Which buildings should be included?

Your HP ordinance sets the criteria for designation under the definition for historic district: “a geographically definable area, possessing a significant concentration, linkage, or continuity of sites, buildings, structures or objects united by past events or aesthetically by plan or physical development. A district may also comprise individual elements separated geographically but linked by association or history.” A local historic district can include historic and non-historic buildings.

Should vacant lots be excluded?

Not if they are part of an area you want to protect. What goes on a vacant lot can certainly impact its historic neighbors! You want to make sure new construction fits in.

Should a buffer zone surround the district?

Extending the boundary line just beyond what are recognized as the most important historic resources could be a good idea, depending on the area and local support for including “extra” properties.

Should the local district boundaries follow the National Register boundaries?

Not necessarily. National Register criteria for districts are different and often more exclusive than the criteria in your local ordinance. Depending on how long ago your National Register district was created, there may be eligible properties outside of its boundary that it would be prudent to protect.

Information above condensed from “Maintaining Community Character: How to Establish a Local Historic District” by Pratt Cassity. Available from the National Trust for Historic Preservation at: preservationbooks.org