

The time is now for historic districts

COMMENTARY

Mark
Micheli

Nobody likes to be told what they can or can't do with their property, but this shouldn't be a major concern of recent efforts to establish an historic district in Malden.

The five volunteers on the city's Historic District Study Committee aren't proposing an architectural police state.

What they're proposing is a sane method for restoring and maintaining one of the city's most valuable assets — its history as it relates to its structures and its neighborhoods. And what the committee recognizes is that Malden's historic neighborhoods are in danger of extinction without this small bit of democratic intervention.

After researching the homes and businesses in various neighborhoods in the city, the committee is proposing that the downtown neighborhood behind the Malden Public Library become the city's first area to reap the benefits of this protection. Before that happens, the historic district plan has to be approved by the state and the Malden City Council.

I happen to live in this neighborhood and welcome the historic district designation and all that comes with it for several reasons.

This neighborhood is bordered by architectural treasures — the Malden Public Library which was designed by the esteemed architect H. H. Richardson, the Davenport Home and the First Baptist Church. But a walk behind these historic gems reveals a mismatch of properties in various stages of glory and decline.

The transient nature of this neighborhood, along with the abundance of absentee landlords, has inflicted it with a heavy dose of ambivalence when it comes to the upkeep

of properties. Establishing a historic district here and imposing design review guidelines that property owners have to follow when making renovations will inject a much-needed dose of historic respect and neighborhood pride to the area.

The guidelines being proposed by the Malden Historic District Study Committee are realistic for this working-class community and very lenient compared to guidelines used by historic districts in other cities. Members of the Historic District Study Committee know Malden, its residents and are realistic as to what would be tolerated and what would propose a hardship for property owners.

The guidelines they're proposing would protect the rights of homeowners to do what they want to with

their properties while guarding against only the most severe violations of building maintenance.

Outsiders who own property in the neighborhood and reap the financial rewards of the rents they collect will no longer be able to slap plywood up over broken windows or deteriorating porches while saving their money to make more respectable renovations to their homes in more affluent communities.

Yet, many misconceptions about these design review guidelines persist.

First of all, the city's plans would not give the city the right to tell homeowners what color they can paint their homes. Malden's plan specifically mentions "paint colors" as something that will not be regulated along with: storm doors and windows, work not seen from the public right of way, routine maintenance, interior construction, landscape planting, traffic control devices and public safety features.

And although "substitute siding" is listed as one of the items that would be required to come under review, the committee is not proposing to outlaw vinyl siding. In fact, at a recent public meeting, committee members actually used a picture of a vinyl-sided home to show how a historic renovation of a home can be done right.

Getting expert advice in making renovation decisions is a key benefit of owning property in an historic district. Smart and conscious property owners will be able to take advantage of getting free advice for architectural and landscape projects. And special grants and low-interest loans will be available to property owners for some renovation projects.

All of these benefits for individual property owners will have an overall benefit for the neighborhood and the city. Property values, over time, should increase. And this is a positive thing, not negative as one resident was quoted as saying in this newspaper last week.

The resident's argument was that the neighborhood might lose its "diversity" if property values were to increase. This is ludicrous.

Unlike our lilly-white municipal neighbors, Malden and this neighborhood do not

have a chance of losing its "diversity," on either the economic or racial fronts. And everyone, regardless of their race or how much money they have in their wallet, deserves to live in a well-maintained neighborhood and one that respects, honors and celebrates its historic past.

Mark Micheli, the former managing editor of the Malden Observer newspaper group, lives in Malden and writes a monthly column for this newspaper.