

February 25, 2021

To: Newton City Council, Zoning and Planning Committee:

Re: Proposed changes to the 50-year threshold for demolition review by the Newton Historical Commission

We are writing to express our strong support for the continued use of the 50-year threshold for evaluating the historical significance of houses and other structures requested by homeowners for partial and/or full demolition. We are also writing to express our strong opposition to selecting a new proposed threshold of 1945, or any other firm date, for evaluating the historical significance of structures proposed for partial and/or full demolition.

Here are the major points behind our position:

- 1) The 50-year threshold is used by over 1,000 municipalities nationwide, following recommendations of the Historic Sites Survey (1936), a predecessor of the National Historic Landmark Program and the National Register of Historic Places, and all overseen by the National Park Service. *A number of communities manage their preservation programs with relaxed or no age criteria for designation.* Among others, communities with no age limit include Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Fairfax County, and Boulder. New York City has a 30-year limit and Seattle a 25-year limit. The working group has proposed a 75-year threshold for Newton, extending even more as the years go by...next year will be 76 years and the year after 77, and then 78, and 79 and so on and so on.
- 2) As Newton resident and history professor Ellen Fitzpatrick noted at last month's Historical Commission meeting, "History does not stop at 1945." Over time, Newton should be able to consider preserving a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, Walter Gropius, I.M. Pei, Frank Gehry and Buckminster Fuller, and a myriad of other world-renowned architects. It should also be able to review demolition requests for houses designed by current and future architects who have yet to become famous. And, the Commission should be able to consider such iconic landmarks as the CITGO sign (should they be located in Newton), and the birthplace of a future president. What is new now, may be historic—if only we have the patience to wait.
- 3) Had the 1945 threshold been in place in 2020, the Newton Historical Commission would not have been able to preferably preserve (unanimously) contemporary houses at 156 Highland St., 44 Mignon Rd., or 180 Allen Ave.—all designed by well-noted architects and all built in 1959 and 1960.
- 4) Changing the 50-year threshold is a solution in search of a problem. The Commission's current work load is not an issue; in fact, since the City Council eliminated the ability of homeowners to transfer demolition delays, the number of requests for demolition permits has declined from roughly 20 per month to a very manageable 12 or so per month.
- 5) The working group's proposed changes would allow the Commission to continue to review plans for houses that are A) already listed on the National Register, B) have been

determined eligible for the National Register, or C) were previously surveyed on MAC-RIS. While these exceptions are better than none at all, we feel that they are unnecessarily limiting features, and administratively, would be a nightmare for homeowners trying to find out if their house fits in one of those categories, and for city staff trying to research how each home can be categorized before a building is directed to the Historical Commission or a building permit is issued.

Newton has a proud history and an engaged citizenry that has always honored historic preservation and has worked to protect and preserve our historic resources. By drawing a line in the sand at 1945 the city would be turning its back on our rich history—past, present, and future—saying our future greatness stops here.

Thank you for your consideration of our support for maintaining the 50-year threshold.

Newton Historical Commission