

BENEFITS OF HISTORIC RESOURCE SURVEYS

One of the most important components of any local preservation program is a historic survey program.¹ Historic surveys serve as the foundation for local preservation efforts by providing for the systematic collection and organization of information on the buildings, structures and sites that are of local historical and cultural significance, as well as those that are not.

As a Certified Local Government through the National Park Service, the City of San Francisco is required to maintain a system for the survey and inventory of historic properties. The Planning Department established the Comprehensive Citywide Cultural and Historical Resource Survey Program in 1999, with survey results integrated into neighborhood planning efforts. The Eastern Neighborhoods Area Plan, for example, prioritizes completion of surveys to “identify any ‘potential historic districts’ and prioritize such potential historic districts for advancement as new historic districts under Planning Code Article 10.”²

Planning Benefits

Helps avoid last-minute disputes over historic significance: A common complaint about the misuse of preservation laws arises when neighborhood advocates initiate last-ditch landmark nominations to stop development projects – often at the point when the demolition permit is pending. By establishing historic significance (or lack thereof) at the front end of the process, surveys provide greater predictability for property owners by helping to limit costly efforts to landmark properties targeted for demolition.

Helps identify developable areas: Surveys provide planners with a database from which to channel new development. Sites that are identified as non-contributing are available for infill development, and can help guide area plan efforts in identifying areas prime for increased density.

Surveys provide decision makers with a framework for evaluating relative significance: Absent comprehensive survey information, the Historic Preservation Commission and Board of Supervisors must sometimes engage in piecemeal decision making on City Landmark nominations, with no information as to whether other similar properties may be more significant or more representative of a particular architectural style or building type.

Benefits to Property Owners

Eligibility for State Historical Building Code (SHBC): The SHBC gives property owners flexibility to find economical methods to allow for the rehabilitation of historic features while still retaining the structure’s historic integrity. Many projects that would otherwise be financially impossible under today’s building code are made feasible by the SHBC, whose regulations are performance-based rather than prescriptive.

Streamlined Environmental Review: Understanding a building’s historic status ahead of time helps expedite the permitting process and facilitate the Planning Department’s review. Absent survey information, project applicants must pay for an individualized assessment of their property if it is over 45 years old. This process can be time-consuming, inconsistent and expensive, with a standard Historic

¹ The American Planning Association “National and Chapters support efforts by local governments to integrate preservation into the land planning process, including incorporating preservation goals into the community master plan and reconciling and coordinating preservation policies with local development policies.” APA Policy Guide on Historic and Cultural Resources, Policy Guide Principle 4, www.planning.org/policy/guides/adopted/historic.htm.

² Eastern Neighborhoods Plan, Section 3(F)3(c)

Resource Evaluation Report (HRER) costing \$2,500 or more. A survey saves everyone time and money because the Planning Department has already completed this part of the review process. The survey program allows the Planning Department to more easily identify historic resources located within project areas, expediting initial review under the California Environmental Quality Act.

Within the Eastern Neighborhoods Area Plan – All Uses Permitted As of Right: The Eastern Neighborhoods legislation amended Planning Code section 803.9 to provide zoning incentives to buildings that are designated City Landmarks, contributory to a City Historic District, or “listed on, or determined eligible for the California Register” and are within the MUG, MUO, MUR, and UMU zoning districts. All uses are permitted as of right within these buildings, subject to certain provisions.

Tax Benefits: Properties determined eligible for listing in the California Register or National Register may ultimately qualify for tax benefits in the form of the Mills Act property tax relief and the 20% Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit. The Mills Act is state legislation that offers significant property tax reductions of 40% (or more) for newly improved or recently purchased properties.³ It can be used in conjunction with the Federal Rehabilitation Tax Credit, which provides a federal income tax credit equal to 20% of the cost of rehabilitating a historic building for commercial use. To qualify for the federal credit, the property must be a certified historic structure—that is, individually listed in the National Register or contributing to a National Register historic district.

³ Although the City and County of San Francisco has a Mills Act program, the Board of Supervisors has only approved five Mills Act contracts since its inception. By comparison, other major cities in California, including Los Angeles and San Diego, have hundreds of Mills Act contracts in place. For more information on San Francisco’s Mills Act program, see www.sf-planning.org/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=5078.