TOWN OF AMHERST
PROPOSED NORTH PROSPECT-LINCOLN-SUNSET
HISTORIC DISTRICT
Summary Report, March 2017

SUMMARY
The proposed North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historic District (LHD) is one of the oldest and most distinguished areas in the Town of Amherst. Much of the neighborhood under consideration is already listed on the National Register of Historic Places, as it comprises major portions of the existing Lincoln-Sunset and Prospect-Gaylord National Historic Districts. Encompassing 195 properties, the proposed district is a significant local historic resource, graced with dozens of architectural gems that span the late 1700s to the early 1900s in a striking and intact blend of original examples of Greek Revival, Gothic Revival, Italianate, Queen Anne, Colonial Revival, Vernacular Farmhouse, American Foursquare, Neoclassical, Craftsman, and Tudor Revival styles.

Beyond its architectural merits, perhaps more than any other neighborhood in Amherst, the proposed LHD reflects and encapsulates Amherst’s intellectual, cultural, and economic development between the Civil War and the Second World War (1865-1940). This neighborhood was never simply an enclave for rich or socially prominent Amherst residents. Laborers, artisans, and servants also lived and plied their trades within the area under study. Generations of African Americans and Irish were a continual presence, some domestic workers for or employees of their more affluent neighbors, others self-employed but providing neighborhood services. All their houses, modest and stately alike, remain very much the way they once were, interwoven in a colorful, inextricable tapestry.

Most of the streetscapes are characterized by uniform setbacks, broad lawns and mature deciduous trees lining the road and reflect the orderly pattern of development that characterized this neighborhood. Houses are generally oriented towards the street with side or back yards for lawns and gardens. The proposed district contains a dense concentration of houses dating primarily from the 1860s to the 1930s. Despite being in close proximity to the downtown commercial area of Amherst, this district retains an unusually well preserved group of mid to late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century houses. The historical significance of the North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset LHD also derives from identifiable local architects, stonemasons, carpenters, laborers and builders involved in the district’s development. A socially diverse group of residents lived in the neighborhood and interacted with one another, including entrepreneurs and merchants, trades people and domestic service workers.

If approved, the proposed North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset LHD would constitute a significant architectural and historical resource for the entire Town of Amherst. An LHD designation would greatly expand the cultural zone that has recently been established in downtown Amherst by documenting a social and demographic record distinct from other parts of Amherst, as well as from neighboring towns in western Massachusetts.
PROPOSED LAYOUT
The proposed North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset LHD is noteworthy for its largely intact mid nineteenth-century to early twentieth-century architecture, streetscapes, and settings, which originated from its well documented historical development pattern. The still-intact architecture of the district represents the diverse cross-section of people who built it, who lived there, and who contributed to the rapidly expanding economy.

The proposed LHD is a centrally located network of 9 residential streets (from east to west) Tan Brook, Fearing Street, North Prospect Street, Pease Place, McClellan Street, Beston Street, Paige Street, Cosby Avenue, Lincoln Avenue, Elm Street and Sunset Avenue. It includes portions of the adjacent Amity, Allen, and Hallock Streets.

WHAT IS A LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT
Local Historic Districts (“LHDs” hereafter) are the only reliable means of protecting publicly visible historic structures and landscapes and can be an effective and popular planning tool. An LHD subjects major exterior changes – demolition or significant modification of architectural
features visible from a public way – to review by a locally appointed commission working according to locally developed standards. It does not interfere with existing zoning regulations. It concerns only the appearance of property, not its use. It does not prevent owners from making changes to their properties. It does not require owners to restore their properties. It allows maintenance and minor repairs. The Amherst LHD Bylaw leaves the color of house paint entirely un-regulated. The purpose is to oversee architectural changes going forward into the twenty-first century. The Amherst Historic District Commission can issue three types of certificates, after considering the evidence: Certificates of Appropriateness, Certificates of Non-Applicability and Certificates of Hardship.

For every building permit applicant, the first step is to contact the Town Building Inspector. That officer holds authority by delegation from the LHD Commission to investigate whether the building is within a District and whether any architectural change visible from a public way may need to be reviewed by the Commission. In many cases the project does not require review by the Commission. In some cases a written application for Commission approval is required. Since this simplified procedure functions well, this report asks Town Meeting only to add another district to the purview of the Commission. This report does not call for any new enforcement mechanisms. It does not request any changes in the wording of the existing Bylaw.

**RECOMMENDATION**

A North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historic District will preserve the still-visible tracks of the mixed-class, mixed-race neighborhood. Its structures, great and small, reflect the complex mosaic of business interests, workforce backgrounds, socio-economic class, race, and ethnicity, in the years between the 1860s and World War II. Both as evidence of a lived history as well as the visually intact architecture of this LHD will enable Amherst to protect this treasure for coming generations of residents and visitors to enjoy as vibrant testament to the vital forces that came together to create Amherst during its formative period.

The LHD Study Commission recommends that Section 13 of the Amherst Historic District Bylaw be amended by adding the following:

Appendix 2: North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historic District

The North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset Local Historic District shall be a DISTRICT area under this Bylaw. The location and boundaries of the North Prospect-Lincoln-Sunset-Local Historic District are defined and shown on the Local Historic District Map of the Town of Amherst, Sheet 2016-2, dated March 2017, which is a part of this Bylaw. This Sheet is based on the current land records used by the Town Assessor. The delineation of the DISTRICT area boundaries is based on the parcel boundaries shown therein, except as otherwise apparent on the Sheet.
BACKUP MATERIAL

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

So what is a Local Historic District (LHD)?

LHDs offer real, tangible forms of protection for the preservation of historic structures and communities. There are over 200 LHDs in over 120 towns and cities across Massachusetts. They can be as small as a single property or include hundreds of them. The Provincetown LHD contains almost 1,000 properties. The average LHD is around 100 properties. The entire island of Nantucket is an LHD. Many smaller towns than Amherst have multiple LHDs. Currently, Amherst has one – the Dickinson LHD -- 39 properties situated in the vicinity of the Dickinson Museum, including properties in the Dickinson National Register District.

In an LHD, any proposed change to exterior architectural features visible from a public way that would require a Town building permit is reviewed by the locally appointed Historic District Commission. There is no review of interior features. Also, a variety of exterior features are usually exempt from review, such as paint color, air-conditioning units, fences, storm doors and windows. The addition of solar panels is encouraged and not restricted. An LHD doesn’t mandate maintenance of properties. And it DOESN’T prevent new building, development or rental conversions.

So what are the benefits of an LHD?

An LHD prevents demolition of noteworthy structures without adequate review. It ensures that renovations and new structures are in keeping with the prevailing, existing architectural character and standards of the overall neighborhood and surroundings, while encouraging creative new design that is consistent in size or dimensions with other buildings in the neighborhood.

How does an LHD affect property values?

According to a publication on LHDs by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, property values in LHDs stay the same or increase at a faster rate than those in similar, non-LHD designated areas.

If my neighbors and I already maintain the historic character of our properties, why do we need an LHD?

By having an LHD, you can be assured that a NEW property owner across the street or next door also maintains the historic character of the neighborhood.

I thought that we were already in a historic district?

Some of the buildings in the LHD (mainly on Lincoln, Sunset and Amity streets) are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as part of two National Register
Districts. However, the National Register is an honorary designation and offers only minimal protection from construction using state or federal funds. By passing a Local Historic District, the historic and architectural character of our neighborhood based on its social, cultural and demographic history, can be better protected.

**How is an LHD created?**

If there is strong interest in an LHD within a neighborhood, the town Select Board appoints a Study Committee to investigate the local district designation further. The Study Committee holds public meetings, seeks public input, researches the history of the area and prepares a report on its findings. The final step is passage of a historic district bylaw by a two-thirds majority at Town Meeting.

**If my house is included in the LHD, does that mean I have to make it look more historic?**

No, you maintain the current look of your house as long as you would like. Again, an LHD only reviews proposed changes to exterior architectural features visible from a public way in order to maintain a consistent and coherent streetscape in the LHD. Routine maintenance of your property is exempt from review.

**Who are members of the LHD Commission?**

A local bylaw describes specifically how the Select Board makes appointees to the LHD Commission, usually consisting of local architects, realtors, residents and property owners of the district.

**Does this mean that I can’t paint my house any color I want?**

No. You can paint your house any color you choose.

**If my house was located in an LHD and I was constructing an addition that is visible from a public way, what would I have to do?**

During the process of acquiring the building permit for your addition, you would also apply for a certificate of appropriateness from the LHD Commission. The Commission then holds a public hearing and reviews your proposed plans to in terms of the existing character of the LHD. If the addition is appropriate within the overall LHD, the Commission issues a certificate which you present to the Building Inspector to get your building permit. The Commission may recommend modifications to your project.