

Guardians, unpaid public servants trying to faithfully execute the duties given them by City Council, yes – certainly the BAR members are NOT, as you suggest, “pains in the neck.”

Thirty-five years ago our city fathers recognized the value a Historic District, and a Board of Architectural Review, would bring to Winchester – a viable, vibrant and prosperous downtown with unmatched architectural features for a city this size. The availability of tax credits within the Historic District has enabled the redevelopment of the Jones Knitting Mill, the George Washington Hotel, and most recently the Union Bank Building, among others. In turn, these projects have provided many jobs for mostly local workers, an increased tax base, and often increased sales and other tax revenues. Rather than an “impediment” to development, historic districts are facilitators of development. Council President Buettner was correct in recognizing that additional districts would enable other property owners to take advantage of tax credits.

A related issue is the function and operation of a board of architectural review. A historic district alone does nothing but make tax credits available to qualified owners doing appropriate work. A historic district alone does not prevent the demolition of historic or contributing properties, nor does it prevent their alteration or modification, nor their replacement with inappropriate structures using inappropriate materials. ONLY a BAR can do these things.

Is the BAR process onerous or cumbersome. In my personal experience, and in my observation of scores of meetings, NO. Literally, 99% of applications considered by the BAR were approved in the last three years. Would some people rather not go through the process? Probably the same number who would object to having to obtain variances from the building or Zoning Code – all of which are designed to serve the greater good of the community as a whole. For the one person who wishes the boundary line would be drawn around his/her property there are hundreds who recognize THEIR interests are served by living in a historic district whose qualities are maintained by a properly functioning BAR. As a neighbor to the Cork Street owners who wanted to add a porch to their 1790’s house, I am personally glad a BAR was able to review the plans to determine their appropriateness.

Any process can be improved upon. The BAR’s design guidelines – all 14 pages of them, consisting mostly of descriptions of architectural styles – were drawn ten years ago by the state’s premier historic architectural firm. Perhaps they can be improved upon. (Alexandria’s design guidelines for their two historic districts and two BARs run to 197 pages.) Preservation of Historic Winchester seeks the opportunity to work with the city to revise and modify the design guidelines, make alterations to the Historic District, and create new districts to further establish Winchester as the premier example of preservation at its best.

Franklin E. Wright
President, Preservation of Historic Winchester