



## Michigan Historic Preservation Network

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NATIONAL TRUST FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

### **HOW TO SAVE A BUILDING**

#### **A Grassroots Guide for Local Preservationists**

***“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” - Margaret Mead***

Our historic places and buildings help tell the story of our communities, who we are and how we lived. They are the tangible links to our past and the physical representation of the people and events that shaped our unique history. When important buildings are abandoned and deteriorating, local citizens are generally the catalysts for preserving them. They share a collective vision of what these buildings could be again, and the passion and perseverance to make it happen. This introductory grassroots guide is for those thoughtful, committed citizens who seek to improve their community, one building at a time.

1. Determine Ownership of the Building. The first task is to determine who owns the property and then explore available options.
  - Ideally, the owner is interested in participating in the building’s preservation and welcomes a nonprofit group’s assistance. This assistance includes but is not limited to: marketing the property to potential new owners, determining adaptive uses for the building, securing funds for a building assessment or historic structures report and, assisting with a National Register of Historic Places nomination.
  - Ask the owner if he/she will donate the property or sell it to the nonprofit organization for a reasonable price. This transaction may provide the owner with a charitable deduction on their income tax.
  - Explore the opportunity of a local municipality, i.e. city, township or county, purchasing the property and then leasing it for a nominal amount to a nonprofit group, who will maintain and repair the building. Partnering with a municipality, in any way, will make the project more financially feasible. By sharing the liability and responsibility for the building, there’s a vested interest in seeing it become a viable community anchor.
  - Organize an “investment group” of individuals who have a passion for preserving the building for a community use. This group could establish a LLC and purchase the building from the property owner, bank or at a tax sale. After determining a

use for the building, the group could rehabilitate the building using private funds and rehab tax credits, and then lease it to a nonprofit group.

- If the building is in foreclosure, the owner retains redemption rights for a period of months after the bank has taken it over. Consult with an attorney or local real estate agent to determine the best course of action to purchase the building from the seller or bank.
2. Identify Immediate Threats to the Building and Secure It. Whether it's a pending demolition, neglect, or vandalism, identifying the threats that will lead to its swift demise is crucial to saving the building. Neglect can lead to deterioration and without proper maintenance, it will inevitably be destroyed. Securing the building from water infiltration, animals and vandals will halt the deterioration temporarily and buy time until further action can be taken. It's also helpful to talk with neighboring property owners and the police to patrol the building often.
  3. Seek a Historic Designation for the Building. The National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) is our nation's official list of cultural resources worthy of preservation and protection. A NRHP listing is an honorific distinction, and is a way to market the building and raise awareness of its importance. A NRHP listing also makes the property eligible for financial incentives. For a commercial owner, this designation makes the property eligible for federal rehabilitation tax credits. For a nonprofit, this designation is a prerequisite for attaining preservation grants for the planning and rehabilitation of the building. There is a significant amount of research required for a NRHP nomination, and it may be completed by anyone. Submitting a NRHP Preliminary Questionnaire to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) is the first step in nominating a property to the National Register. The SHPO staff will provide an opinion about the property's eligibility on the basis of the information provided by the applicant.



*The Dougherty House in Traverse City is owned by Peninsula Twp. and managed by the nonprofit, Peter Dougherty Society.*

For more information on NRHP and to download the Preliminary Questionnaire: [www.michigan.gov/shpo](http://www.michigan.gov/shpo), "National Register of Historic Places." Or contact Robert Christensen at the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office, 517-335-2719 or email: [ChristensenR@michigan.gov](mailto:ChristensenR@michigan.gov)

For more information on the federal rehabilitation tax credits: [www.michigan.gov/shpo](http://www.michigan.gov/shpo), "Historic Preservation Tax Incentives." Or contact the Robert McKay at the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office: Phone 517-335-2727 or email: [mckayr@michigan.gov](mailto:mckayr@michigan.gov).

Although a NRHP listing is valuable on many levels, it does not legally protect the building from future insensitive alterations or demolition. One of the ways this can be done is with a local historic district designation. A local historic district is usually a historically significant area, but also may be an individual building or property, that is protected by a historic district ordinance. The local unit of government, such as the City Council, appoints a historic district commission. This commission is composed of local residents who review all proposed work to the exterior of the buildings in the district. Establishing a local historic district is a community effort and will involve the support and commitment of local property owners and local unit of government. In addition to providing local protection of the buildings, there are other benefits including increased property values, community revitalization, increased tourism revenue and enhanced quality of life for residents and visitors.

For more information on local historic districts: [www.michigan.gov/shpo](http://www.michigan.gov/shpo) “Local Historic Preservation” then “Historic Preservation in Michigan Communities.” Or contact Amy Arnold at the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office: Phone 517-335-2729 or email: [arnolda@michigan.gov](mailto:arnolda@michigan.gov)

4. Determine a Use for the Building. Assuming the building is vacant, determining a viable new use for it will help to secure local financial support, and ensure its long term usefulness for the community.
  - A. The new use for the building should:
    - Have long term sustainability – Will the new use meet a community need? Will it be economically viable? If a nonprofit organization takes ownership, will it be able to sustain the overhead expenses?
    - Be compatible with the building design – Avoid making any alterations to the building that would damage or destroy its historic character. Example, remodeling a large single-family house into a theater may require major changes to the floor plan and space. This could potentially destroy its historic integrity.
  - B. Involve the community. Gathering input from community residents for potential uses will not only generate ideas, but also help generate future support for the project. Encourage feedback and invite others to join in the efforts to save the building. Communications methods may include:
    - Letters to the editor
    - Conduct regular community meetings to discuss ideas/options
    - Conduct a community design charrette
    - Personal mailings/phone calls to individuals that may have influence on the success of the project, i.e. long-time residents, historical societies, historians, contractors, architects, community leaders, and real estate agents.
    - Discussions with the local government leaders

- C. Conduct a feasibility study. Hiring a professional consulting firm to conduct a feasibility study can yield invaluable information. A feasibility study may be funded in part or entirely by a local community foundation or state or national preservation matching grants. Likely results from a from a feasibility study may include:
- Better understanding of your core supporters
  - Financial estimate of community support
  - Knowledge of specific community needs not currently met and how building can serve those needs
  - Identification of potential donors/partners/grants to make the project work.

For more information on how to conduct a feasibility study, check the National Trust for Historic Preservation’s website [www.preservationbooks.org](http://www.preservationbooks.org) to purchase “Feasibility Assessment Manual for Reusing Historic Buildings.”

5. Conduct a Building Assessment. A building assessment contains a description of the structure’s design and building materials, its current conditions, and details of its deficiencies. It may also provide recommendations for repairs and rehabilitation efforts. By having an experienced historic architect or consultant conduct a building assessment, the group will be better informed of its immediate physical threats and long-term rehabilitation opportunities. A master rehabilitation work plan can then be created from the assessment, which describes the work to be done and breaks it up into phases. This plan provides the community with a clear set of priorities. The cost of the building assessment will be dependent on the size and complexity of the building and the amount of detailed information in the final report. Like the feasibility study, the building



*The Wexford County Historical Society hired a qualified architect to conduct a building assessment and create a master rehabilitation plan for their museum building.*

assessment may be funded in part or entirely by a local community foundation or preservation matching grants. It is important that a qualified historic architect or consultant be hired for this project, as they have the experience of working with historic buildings, and will make recommendations sensitive to the preservation of the historic integrity of the building.

A list of qualified preservation professionals can be attained from the Michigan State Historic Preservation Office website: [www.michigan.gov/shpo](http://www.michigan.gov/shpo) , “SHPO publications.”

Or Michigan Historic Preservation Network's *Historic Resource Council Directory*:  
[www.mhpn.org](http://www.mhpn.org) "Press & Publications", then "HRC Directory."

6. Seek Support from Local Government Leaders. Preserving a community building will not be possible without the support of local government leaders. These leaders can provide resources, services-in-kind, possible funding and generate community awareness of the project. It is important these leaders are able to identify the building and learn why its rehabilitation is important to the community. The best way to begin this communication process is through group members who have relationships with these officials. With their assistance, arrange initial meetings with these leaders to discuss the rehabilitation project in general terms. These leaders will want to know the extent of the community's support for the project, as well as prospective ideas and plans. They should also be assessing the organization's capacity for carrying them out. Exhibiting professionalism as well as passion for the project will help to ensure their endorsement. Once the project has been endorsed and initiated, it's important to keep the government leaders regularly informed of its progress.
  
7. Build Community Awareness and Support. Once you've established support from the local government leaders, reaching out to the community for financial assistance and volunteers will be your next step. Garnering their support is a key component to the success of a rehabilitation project, particularly when done in the early stages of planning. Gain an understanding of how your community works and who the leaders are to help you deliver your message. Effective community communication can be done through a variety of ways, including:
  - Generate regular press releases for the mass media, i.e. newspapers, radio stations, and television stations and follow up with them directly to offer details and personal interviews
  - Create a website to keep supporters informed, and ask to be added as a link to other websites, such as partnering nonprofits or the local unit of government.
  - Consider Facebook, Twitter and other social networking websites
  - Submit Letters to the Editor
  - Develop a mailing list of established supporters and keep them updated using mail or email addresses
  - Conduct periodic community meetings at various public venues for a Q & A to discuss the project

The initial messages should include the history of the building, its importance to the community, the group's mission, goals and plans for its rehabilitation, and how this project will benefit the community. Be prepared for possible skepticism or even opposition to the project, and respond with appropriate, thoughtful answers. Conducting a professional, strategic campaign to save a building will ensure the support of local citizens and government leaders. As the project progresses, providing regular updates to the supporters will be imperative in maintaining their enthusiasm and interest in the project.

## 8. Consider Organizing a Preservation Nonprofit

A. Seek Nonprofit Status. The majority of grants and loans for rehabilitation projects are available only to nonprofit organizations or public agencies that are incorporated and have IRS tax-exempt status. Before pursuing this process, other alternatives may be explored:

- Study the list of active nonprofits currently in the area. Are there any that are compatible with your ideas and goals? Could you explore the idea of creating a special joint project or initiative with them?
- If your efforts are for one project only, consider forming an unincorporated association or club. If the annual budget is less than \$25,000, no reporting is required, and this may be a viable option.



*The Elk Rapids Historical Society, a 501 C 3 nonprofit, was recently donated a church, which will soon house the local museum collections.*

B. Utilize Principles and Practices for Nonprofit Excellence . These can be attained through printed documents from:

- National Trust for Historic Preservation, [www.preservationnation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org)
- Minnesota Council of Nonprofits, [www.mncn.org](http://www.mncn.org)
- Michigan Nonprofit Association, <http://www.mnaonline.org/>
- North Sky Nonprofit Network, of Traverse City Michigan, 231- 929-3934. <http://www.northskynonprofitnetwork.org/press.shtm>.

**This grassroots guide was created to serve as an introduction to saving a historic community building. Depending on the final ownership and management of the building, there will be additional and ongoing work including fundraising, grant writing, hiring contractors, and managing the rehabilitation project. If the preservation nonprofit maintains ownership of the building, it may need to create a building subcommittee to manage these tasks and/or coordinate efforts with other entities. Remember that preservation always starts with the thoughtful commitment of a small group of dedicated citizens, and the results of your efforts will be a lasting gift for your community.**

### **Acknowledgements**

The following resources were used as references

- “Make Your Dream A Reality: A Community Group Guide to a Historic Preservation Project,” by Leah Brown, of The State Historic Preservation Office at the South Carolina Dept. of Archives and History.

- “Organizing for Change,” National Trust for Historic Preservation *Information Series* No. 67, 1992
- “Save A Threatened Resource. Ten Essential Lessons,” by Ann McGlone, News from the Alliance of Preservation Commissions. July-August 2007.

### **For More Information**

These organization’s web sites are full of resources, articles, and publications that will be useful to anyone seeking information on historic buildings and how to preserve them. Information includes local, state or federal historic designations, preservation financial incentives, technical advice, and current issues facing the preservation industry.

#### **Michigan Historic Preservation Network**

MHPN is the statewide preservation nonprofit organization that provides education, resources, advocacy assistance and networking opportunities for communities and property owners of historic places.

Website: [www.mhpn.org](http://www.mhpn.org) Email: [info@mhpn.org](mailto:info@mhpn.org) 517.371.8080

#### **Michigan State Historic Preservation Office**

SHPO is the state agency that coordinates National Register of Historic Places, local historic districts, rehabilitation tax credit programs, Main Street program, and Lighthouse program. 702 W. Kalamazoo St., P.O. Box 30740, Lansing, Michigan 48909-8240

Website: [www.michigan.gov/shpo](http://www.michigan.gov/shpo) 517.373.1630

#### **The National Trust for Historic Preservation**

NTHP is the largest, private national preservation nonprofit and a partner with MHPN. Both organizations are dedicated to protecting the irreplaceable and providing leadership, education, advocacy and resources to save Michigan’s diverse historic places and revitalize communities.

Website: [www.preservationnation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org)

#### **The National Park Service**

NPS is the national agency that educates and protects our history. The resources found here are extremely valuable for anyone trying to maintain an older property, particularly the *Preservation Briefs* and *Technical Notes*.

Website: <http://www.nps.gov/history/preservation.htm>