



PRESERVATION ALLIANCE

for greater philadelphia

Analysis of Proposed Amendment to Philadelphia's Historic Preservation Ordinance

On November 20, Councilmember Squilla introduced [Bill No. 251030](#) amending Chapter 14-1000 of the Philadelphia Code, which governs the designation and protection of historic buildings and districts. While some edits are acceptable or clarifying, many provisions significantly alter how designations are initiated, how notice is provided, and how building permit applications are handled during the designation process.

These changes would meaningfully weaken transparency, reduce opportunities for public engagement, and create new barriers to designating historic resources.

Below is a breakdown of what the legislation does and how it would affect preservation citywide.

1. New Procedural Barriers to Issuing Notice of Designation

What the bill changes

Before the Historical Commission can even issue notice that a property is being considered for designation (Amendment §14-1004(2)(a)), it must now:

- Requires the Historical Commission to hold a public meeting before issuing notice of a proposed designation (§14-1004(2)(a)).
- Requires 30 days' advance notice to the property owner before this meeting.
- Allows the Commission to decline to issue notice if designation could interfere with an active or pending zoning application, even one not publicly visible (§14-1004(2)(a)(.2)(.a)).
- Imposes a three-year waiting period before a previously denied nomination may be reconsidered (§14-1004(2)(a)(.2)(.b)).

Impact

- The new pre-notice meeting creates a dangerous delay of 30-60 days, in which buildings can be altered or demolished before the Commission gains jurisdiction.
- Allowing pending zoning applications, which are not public information, to block designation invites strategic filings and undermines transparency.
- The three-year bar prevents reconsideration even when evidence improves or Commission membership changes, limiting flexibility and responsiveness.

2. New Restrictions on Permit Reviews During Pending Designations

What the bill changes

- Requires the Commission to approve permits if an owner demonstrates “material commitments” to development plans, such as contracts, zoning permits, or design work (§14-1005(6)(f)(.2)).
- Defines the permit filing date as the date the application fee is paid (§14-1005(6)(f)(.1)(a)).
- Removes language allowing the Commission to evaluate the impact of proposed work on the surrounding context (§14-1005(6)(e)(.4)).

Impact

- “Material commitments” are not public information, giving owners unilateral control over evidence and disadvantaging communities and advocates.
- Using the application fee instead of the permit fee makes it easier to file strategic placeholder applications.
- Removing consideration of the surrounding context eliminates an essential preservation standard and weakens design review

3. Substantive Changes to Designation Criteria

What the bill changes

- Adds a new requirement that the Commission must determine that “the benefits of designation are not outweighed by other policy factors” (§14-1004(1)).
- Raises the standard for archaeological significance to resources “highly likely to yield” information (§14-1004(1)(i)).
- Removes “landscape architect or designer” from Criterion E, limiting significance determinations (§14-1004(1)(e))

Impact

- Introducing undefined “policy factors” creates a subjective test that could be used to reject otherwise eligible nominations.
- The “highly likely” archaeological threshold is unrealistically high, given the limited documentation of resources, risking loss of significant sites.
- Removing landscape architects and designers from Criterion E threatens the ability to recognize significant landscapes, public parks, cemeteries, and other culturally meaningful landscapes

Overall Assessment

The Preservation Alliance remains committed to strengthening Philadelphia’s preservation framework. While we support thoughtful modernization of the Historic Preservation Ordinance, this bill, without significant revisions, would shift power toward developers,

limit community participation, and weaken the protections that have long protected Philadelphia's historic places.

We urge City Council and the Department of Planning and Development to reconsider these provisions and work collaboratively with the preservation community to ensure that any updates enhance the City's ability to protect its significant architectural and cultural heritage.