

Newsletter Article  
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## Fences in Historic Districts

Recently, the Detroit Historic District Commission (HDC) amended its fence guidelines to promote **greater historical integrity for fencing** in Detroit historic districts. In particular, the Commission has **removed both vinyl fences and unfinished wood fences** from the guidelines.

Here's why.

Fences are an element in the architectural design of an historic property. The general rule is that the fences should fit with the historic character of properties. A fence that has design, material, location, and color that complement an historic property maintains the integrity of that property and contributes to its architecture. Fences also can diminish a property, if the design, materials, location, and color of a fence are not consistent with its historic architectural design.

Since fences are part of the character of historic properties, any changes to fences or installation of new fences must be approved by the HDC *before work is begun*. See below.

In the past, the Commission has allowed both vinyl and unpainted wood fences, but they have not proven to be historically appropriate. First, the HDC did allow vinyl fences that were supposed to look like wood or metal. However, in the Commission's experience, vinyl fences never look like painted wood or metal. They look like vinyl. And vinyl is not an historic material. Second, historic fences were painted or stained. Now the guidelines say that a wood fence should be painted or stained a color appropriate to the historic property.

Hedges fall under the fence guidelines. They are governed by the same principle, that they should fit with the historic character of properties.

Where historic fences exist, the preservation principle is that they should be maintained, repaired, and restored as historic elements of the property, just like any other historic element. The fence should not be removed. The more distinctive is the fence, the greater is its importance in the overall architectural design, and the greater is the importance of maintaining and retaining the fence. Brick or cast-iron fences are the prime examples. The same principle applies for historic hedges.

When new fences are proposed to be installed, the Commission considers several factors in deciding if proposed fences are historically appropriate for properties. The Commission has guidelines.

<https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2019-08/Fence%20and%20Hedge%20Guidelines.pdf>

Here are the general principles.

- The **location** of the fence must not disrupt the streetscape. For that reason, fences are not allowed forward of the front façade of a house. There is one exception for corner lots.
- **Design and materials** must be historically appropriate. Many types of wood, masonry, and metal fences are allowed. The design must be one that has historic precedent. The one prohibition is that stockade fences are not allowed. Where these are seen, they may pre-date the guidelines, or they may be unapproved (violations). For hedges, a variety of plant materials are appropriate.
- **Fence height** is limited to 6 feet. The exception is that fences may be 8 feet tall along the alley side of a property. For corner lot exceptions, the limit is 3 feet.
- The **color** of fences must be compatible with the property. What color is appropriate for a property is governed by its architectural style. For example, prairie style houses have natural colors. A white fence would not be appropriate.

The process of getting approval from HDC for new or altered fences or hedges begins with submitting a Project Review Request to [hdc@detroitmi.gov](mailto:hdc@detroitmi.gov). Here is where to find the Request form and the Building Permit application form.

[https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/forms/2019-10/01\\_HDC%20Project%20Review%20Request.pdf](https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/forms/2019-10/01_HDC%20Project%20Review%20Request.pdf)

HDC staff was wide latitude within the HDC guidelines to approve new fences or changes to fences. All locations, materials, designs, and colors must be approved. HDC staff will offer advice to modify an application so that staff can approve it. If a proposal falls outside the guidelines and staff cannot approve it, then the proposal must go to the Commission for a formal hearing.

The Commission occasionally has had to order that new fences be removed, when they had not been approved and were not historically appropriate. To avoid such a costly problem, please follow the approval process *before signing contracts and before starting work*.