FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date: Thursday, January 23, 2020
Contact: Tom Shevlin, Communications Officer | (401) 845-5350

City Seeks to Elevate History Against Climate Change

NEWPORT, R.I. (Thursday, January 23, 2020) – The City of Newport this week became one of the first communities in the country to adopt standards designed to help protect some of its most historic neighborhoods from the threat posed by rising sea levels.

On Tuesday, Historic District Commission members voted unanimously to adopt a series of design guidelines for elevating historic buildings that seek to strike a balance between the preservation of historic neighborhoods and the need to face the present-day realities posed by climate change.

“Resiliency to climate change – and specifically the threat posed by rising sea levels – is a fundamental component to the City’s long-term historic preservation goals, and these guidelines speak to that,” said Helen Johnson, Newport’s Historic Preservation Planner. “For the last several years, we’ve been exploring how rising sea levels are projected to impact some of our most historically significant and environmentally sensitive neighborhoods. And while we can’t control the tides, we can influence how we respond as a community. By adopting these design guidelines, we’re not only better protecting ourselves and our neighbors from sea level rise, but we’re also...”
doing our part to ensure that the historic fabric that has made Newport what it is today is given a chance to endure for future generations to enjoy.”

Under the guidelines, historic property owners in the FEMA Flood Zone will be permitted to apply for permission to elevate their properties provided that certain design thresholds are met. Standards which the HDC will use to determine the appropriateness of individual applications will include streetscape and contextual considerations, building siting, foundation design, and general architectural and preservation concerns.

Property owners will be encouraged to incorporate existing materials wherever possible, with historic, character-defining features “retained first, salvaged and reused second, or rebuilt in-kind when necessary as a last option.” Buildings that have a direct architectural relationship with their neighbors will also be considered within their context and their effect on one another, and wherever possible, homeowners will be encouraged to employ architectural strategies to lessen the overall impact of the raised structure to the surrounding neighborhood.

“Ultimately, this Policy Statement gives the Historic District Commission a tool to guide the inevitable conversation and decision process when a Newport homeowner in a flood zone applies to elevate their historic building,” explained HDC Chair Andy Bjork. “Our process was deliberate and thorough. It included community preservation organizations, local architects, city officials and the general public. We learned and shared ideas with other historic cities dealing with the same concerns – Charleston, SC, Annapolis, MD and Nantucket, MA. I am personally pleased with our Commission’s support and acknowledgement of climate change reality and their commitment to take the necessary steps to preserve historic properties in the face of this real and present threat.”

“The members of the Historic District Commission and our Preservation Planner deserve a tremendous amount of credit for spearheading this important effort,” said City Manager Joseph Nicholson, Jr. “As a City, we take seriously the importance of preserving the historic fabric of our community and we’re proud to be among the first communities in the country to contemplate such a forward-thinking policy.”
“A large amount of credit goes to Helen Johnson, the City’s Preservation Planner,” added Bjork. “Her professional drive kicked-off our efforts and she coordinated the steps along the way. Climate change and its consequences are central to her generation and the next – we should all be thankful for her spirit and passion on this most important initiative.”

Newport has historically been plagued by significant flooding issues in its low-lying areas, in part due to the development on filled-in land where marshes once stood. However, in recent years, there has also been an intensification of flooding due to hurricanes, severe storms, and high tides. The problem was not lost on Newport’s Historic District Commission, which over the last several years has been exploring what steps the City can take in order to adapt to this “new normal.”

Following a series of public forums and workshops, the Historic District Commission has determined that the best policy for the long-term preservation of historic structures is to support elevating structures to FEMA requirements, when necessary.

“Our goal in putting forth these guidelines is to provide homeowners with a clear understanding of what we’ll be looking at as it relates to elevation requests,” Johnson said. “In some cases, elevation may not be the best option, however we also recognize that for many homes in some of the City’s more vulnerable areas, historic elevation is the best route to preservation.”

For all contributing buildings located within the City’s Historic District, applicants must provide thorough documentation of the building in its existing state, to include “As-built” elevations, floor plans, building sections, site plan, elevation certificate and exterior photographs. Interior photographs may also be requested if interior floorplans need to be changed to accommodate the building elevation.

The guidelines are the latest in a series of projects aimed at mitigating the effects of sea level rise throughout the City. Last spring, the Department of Utilities completed the installation of a
specially designed tide gate, which prevents incoming high tides and storm surges from infiltrating the City’s stormwater system. The gate was installed just south of one of the City’s most historic and vulnerable neighborhoods, The Point, where dozens of and 18th and 19th century homes sit clustered just steps away from Narragansett Bay.