

# **The Crisis Handbook: A Guide to Community Action**

## ***Introduction***

A true classic never goes out of style. When Preservation Pennsylvania first published *The Crisis Handbook: A Guide to Community Action* over two decades ago, the heritage landscape was far different that it is today. Funding was more readily available, strong governmental infrastructure supported heritage, and social media had not yet been grafted into American popular culture.

Yet, no matter how times may change, the fundamental dynamics of saving historic buildings are essentially the same: passionate people uniting behind a common cause and formulating a strategic plan of action.

At Preservation Pennsylvania, we are frequently contacted by individuals and community-based organizations for assistance with endangered resources. We take pride in offering free technical assistance in the field—a new initiative since *The Crisis Handbook* debuted in 1990—to provide personalized, on-site support to many special people and unique projects.

Although we would love to be everywhere at once, our staff is sometimes unable to be immediately on the spot during a crisis. For those times when there is not a moment to lose, we are pleased to supply the handbook below as a practical source of hope in the fight to save the irreplaceable past. Through the years, we have come to appreciate *The Crisis Handbook's* applicability and adaptability to countless preservations efforts across Pennsylvania.

On behalf of all of us at Preservation Pennsylvania, I sincerely hope this timeless classic helps you, too.

Good luck with all of your preservation efforts, and thank you very much for your assistance in saving our Commonwealth's heritage.

Sincerely,



Mindy G. Crawford,  
Executive Director

P.S. If you would like to request an on-site visit from our Technical Assistance staff, please [click here](#).

To contact us with a specific question, you may e-mail us at [info@preservationpa.org](mailto:info@preservationpa.org).

## **The Crisis Handbook: A Guide to Community Action**

### **I. KNOW THE BUILDING**

History, like beauty, is sometimes in the eye of the beholder, and significant buildings may be unappreciated by their community because of poor condition, location or lack of aesthetic appeal. In such cases, official designation as historic is invaluable; and, it is always difficult to generate enthusiasm for the preservation of a building that does not meet the criteria for official designation. Many communities have enacted local ordinances that designate historic buildings at the local level, but the best-known designation is the federal listing, the National Register of Historic Places. A property is considered to be listed in the National Register if it is listed individually or as "contributing" in a National Register historic district. It is important to note that National Register listing provides a property with no protection against privately funded actions and only limited protection against publicly funded projects. Local designation protection varies depending on the local ordinance. For more information on the National Register, you should contact the State Historic Preservation Office.

**A. Assess significance**

**B. Identify owner**

**C. Check zoning**

**D. Assess physical condition**

**E. Establish fair market value**

### **II. IDENTIFY THREAT**

Proposed demolition poses a clear, and clearly understood, threat to a historic building, but other, less obvious, threats may present as great a danger. Even the proposed incompatible use of adjacent land or buildings may threaten the future of a historic building. Understanding the threat

will guide your response; if, for example, the proposed project requires a federal permit or will use federal funds, Section 106 of the Historic Preservation Act requires that a review of the project be undertaken by the State Historic Preservation Office. (See address in Appendix)

#### **A. Proposed demolition**

- Evaluate potential replacement development
  - Will it meet current zoning?
  - Is this genuinely best site?
  - What investment will it generate?
- Determine sources of financing for demolition and new construction
  - Are public dollars involved?
  - Is private financing secured?
  - What is source of private financing?
- Identify any needed local, state, and/or federal permits

#### **B. Neglect**

- Check compliance with existing municipal codes
- Review owner's record with other property
- Review owner's property tax record for this property

#### **C. Incompatible use**

- Review existing municipal zoning
- Evaluate impact on neighborhood

### **III. DETERMINE "REALITY"**

It is always important to have a realistic view of what you may be up against. If you have less than a week to stop a project that is seen to be in the public interest by a community that has no

history of support for preservation, your chances of success are small but read on!

**A. Evaluate climate of opinion**

- Organizational support for preservation
- Neighborhood support for preservation
- Community support for preservation
- Business, media, or government support for preservation
- Support of above for preservation of this building

**B. Assess time limits**

- Municipal review and permit process
- State/federal review and permit process
- Project timetable

**C. Know process for project approval**

**D. Identify allies**

- Yours
- Theirs
- Determine each player's self-interest

**IV. KNOW YOUR GOAL**

There are many good reasons to become involved in a preservation issue. The principal reason should *always* be to influence a design/planning decision in your community. In the process, however, you can increase your community's understanding of preservation issues, gain new members or support for your organization, or encourage more protective legislation.

### **A. Relative to specific case**

- Is it to prevent demolition?
- Is it to modify new plans?
- Is it to restore the historic building?

### **B. Relative to community**

- Is it to create a community resource?
- Is it to generate awareness?
- Is it to encourage new legislation?

### **C. Relative to organization**

- Is it to increase public support?
- Is it to position organization:
  - For next issue?
  - For fund raising?
  - With community?

## **V. EXPLORE ALTERNATIVES WITH OWNER/DEVELOPER**

Mark Twain wrote "it is difference of opinion that makes horse races." Plans for development unsympathetic to historic resources may arise from many motivations, including concern over financial return, changing demographics, urban policy, lack of imagination, or honest preference for the new. It is always in the best interest of a community and the concerned parties if differences of opinion can be resolved through negotiation. Do not assume that the other side is determined to do what you fear most.

### **A. Prepare to negotiate**

- Visualize best case/worst case scenario

- Prepare short (1-3 page) position statement
- Research economic advantages of preservation
  - Historic rehabilitation tax credits
  - Facade easement donation
  - Financial involvement of government or non-profit organization
    - Acquisition financing at below market rates
    - Construction financing at below market rates
    - Grants (unlikely)
  - Public relations
- Select negotiating team and appoint chairman
  - Keep committee small (6-8)
  - Select members with special skills and influence (e.g., attorneys, architects, planners, developers, etc...)
- Recommend neutral location for meeting

## **B. Negotiate**

- Distinguish the people from the problem
  - Listen to other side's interests
  - Treat other side's concerns with respect
  - Avoid emotional outbursts
  - Do not react to emotional outbursts
- Establish flexible position
  - Focus on desired goal not bargaining position
  - Recognize each side's multiple interests
  - Identify shared interests
  - Avoid debate; seek dialogue

- Propose options for mutual benefit
  - Recommend practical alternate use for building
  - Demonstrate possible inclusion of building in development plan
  - Propose realistic alternative purchaser for property

### **C. Don't be a victim**

- Question "phony facts"
- Present alternative to biased "expert"
- Beware less than full disclosure

## **VI. QUESTION FURTHER ACTION**

Is this the right battle at the right time for you? If negotiation has failed, it is time for you and your organization to decide how much further you wish to go. You should base your decision on the importance of the threatened building; the value of the proposed project; can your organization afford to lose; how any ensuing conflict will affect preservation in your community.

## **VII. PREPARE FOR CONFLICT**

Once you decide to continue your efforts despite failed negotiations, much of your time will be directed at gaining support for your cause in the community. It is essential that your organization be united and clear in its purpose. Both internal coordination and external communication will be more efficient if a single coordinator, or a small committee, leads the organizations efforts. Choose the members of the committee not only for their willingness to work, but also for specific skills and access to decision makers. From this point on, it is not as important to be right as it is for the community to understand why you are right. Your communications must be clear, concise, and compelling.

### **A. Secure organizational support**

### **B. Estimate realistic time and money commitment expected of organization and volunteers**

### **C. Appoint coordinator**

### **D. Select committees**

- Keep committees small (6-8)
- Select members for specific skills and influence (e.g., attorneys, architects, developers, planners, etc...)

### **E. Establish network of allies**

## **VIII. PLAN TO WIN**

Preservation is a most pragmatic discipline, and buildings saved are the truest measure of success. Success in preservation comes from knowledge and communication: knowledge about the endangered building, the threats to it, and the process by which decisions will be made and the persuasive communication of why and how the building should be saved.

### **A. Develop case for your cause**

- Prepare short (1-2 paragraph) mission statement
- Review position paper
- Gather background on other preservation successes
- Prepare economic case for preservation
- Prepare emotional case for preservation (e.g., "I went to Central School. . . .")

### **B. Present positive well-researched testimony**

- Know your facts
  - Significance of building
  - Actual condition—If poor, why?
  - Cost of improvements

- Practical reuse possibilities
- Realistic funding sources
- Cite positive examples
- Prepare hand-outs
- Prepare visuals
- Secure experts
- Coordinate presentation

**C. Generate positive media coverage**

- Identify personable spokesman
- Prepare professional-quality visuals
- Write professional-quality press releases
- Package events to be media-attractive

**D. Involve public**

- Circulate petition
- Stage events
  - Tours
  - Public meetings
  - Vigils
- Secure endorsements from influential people

**E. Involve politicians**

- Create photo opportunities
- Stage events

**F. Consider litigation**

**G. Keep public and organization informed of progress**

**IX. SO WHAT IF YOU DON'T WIN?**

Throughout your efforts to save the building you should conduct yourself in a manner that leads to a positive climate for the protection of other historic resources in your community. Often, it takes the loss of an important building to make a community recognize how vulnerable its resources are and to take steps to protect them. You have won if the loss of one building leads to the protection of other buildings.