

2025 Annual Report for the Historic Area Commission (HAC)

Prepared by: Tera Hayward-Olivas, Chair

Prepared for: New Castle City Council

1. Please provide highlights of the Board/Commission's 2025 activity and efforts.

Historic Review Certificate Applications

From January 2025 through February 2026, the Historic Area Commission reviewed **199 applications and consultations** for Historic Review Certificates (HRCs). These reviews included a range of project types such as exterior alterations, repairs, signage, and other work affecting properties within the Local Historic District and the National Historic Landmark District.

The Commission has continued its efforts to streamline the review process in order to make it more efficient and accessible for applicants while maintaining the standards necessary to safeguard the City's historic resources. This has allowed for a streamlining of the review process with two tiers: Tier 01 – Administrative Reviews, and Tier 02 – Reviews by HAC in a public meeting.

- **Average review time for applications submitted, for administrative processing (approval/denial/request for additional information) or determination that HAC review is required:** 5 days from submission to Historic Architect.
- **Note:** Summary statistics (number of applications reviewed on a monthly basis and average review turnaround time are noted in Tables 01, and Charts 01, 02 and 03, attached at the end of this report in Appendix 01.

Public Education and Outreach

The Commission continued to focus on educating property owners, businesses, and applicants about preservation resources and financial incentives available to them. This includes promoting programs such as:

- The **Delaware State Historic Preservation Tax Credit Program**
- The **Delaware Preservation Fund Small Grants Program**

Increasing awareness of these programs helps property owners maintain historic properties while reducing financial barriers to appropriate preservation work.

Business Signage Guidance

In 2025, the Commission developed an informational handout for businesses located within the Historic Commerce District, with input from legal council.

This document summarizes signage requirements and is intended to assist existing and new businesses in understanding the review process, designing signage that is compatible with the historic character of the district and meets the HAC Design Guidelines and Standards. and assist in addressing issues of signage nonconformance and remediation.

Certified Local Government (CLG) Grant

The City applied for and will be receiving matching funds from a Certified Local Government (CLG) grant to support the preparation of a National Register of Historic Places nomination for the Buttonwood School. This project will document and formally recognize the historic significance of the building and contribute to the broader understanding of the City's historic resources. The grant will also support preliminary research into the history of the Dobbinsville Neighborhood.

Legal Support

City Solicitor Lisa Hattefield began attending Historic Area Commission meetings during the year. Her presence has been helpful in providing legal guidance and ensuring that Commission procedures remain consistent with municipal governance requirements and the quasi-judicial role of the HAC.

Improvements to Public Information and Guidance

At the end of the year, HAC member Michael Westman and I began working with the City Administrator and the City's Historic Architect to improve the information available to the public on the Historic Area Commission page of the City's website.

The goal of these updates is to make information about the historic district more accessible to homeowners, contractors, realtors, and potential property buyers. Improvements focus on clearly explaining the Historic Review Certificate process, summarizing key design guidelines, and providing helpful resources so that applicants understand requirements before beginning work on historic properties.

Improving access to this information helps reduce confusion, supports compliance with the City's preservation standards, and allows projects to move through the review process more smoothly.

2. Would you like to request additional education for your Board/Commission? Have all of your members taken the FOIA class through the University of Delaware? If so when and if not please provide the names of individuals who need training.

Yes. I have discussed holding a training session during one of our regularly scheduled meetings with the City Solicitor and City Administrator. The purpose of this session

would be to review the role and responsibilities of the Historic Area Commission and to reinforce best practices for quasi-judicial bodies.

Because the HAC functions as a quasi-judicial body, commissioners must follow specific procedural standards, including avoiding ex parte communications, maintaining impartiality, and recusing themselves when appropriate. Periodic training helps ensure that commissioners understand these obligations and conduct commission business in a manner consistent with Delaware law and municipal governance standards.

The following members participated in the 2025 FOIA training provided by the City:

- Tera Hayward-Olivas
- Stephen Franklin
- Michael Westman

Confirmation is needed for the following members:

- Mark Lorenz
- Carmela Longobardi
- Joshua Boles

3. **Do you feel you need more training or guidance on how to better deliberate and or be more effective. If so please elaborate.**
4. **What additional logistical support and guidance can the City's Administration provide you to better support your Board/Commission?**

Continued administrative support from City staff is important to ensure that Commission records are properly maintained and that decisions are clearly documented. This includes assistance with record documentation and the formal issuance of Historic Review Certificates following Commission approvals.

5. **Does your Commission or Board interact with a professional advisor. If so, who is the advisor and how does s/he work with (or guide or help) the board/committee.**

The Historic Area Commission relies on administrative support from City staff to ensure that applications are reviewed consistently, applicants receive appropriate guidance, and the Commission can effectively carry out its responsibilities under City Code.

The City's Preservation Architect, Leila Hamroun, serves as the Commission's professional advisor. In this capacity, the Preservation Architect reviews applications, prepares technical recommendations, and provides professional guidance to assist the Historic Area Commission in evaluating proposed work within the Historic District,

National Historic Landmark District, and properties that are individually listed on the National Register. The Preservation Architect collaborates with City Staff to identify Tier 01 and Tier 02 applications, expediting the approval or disposition (denial, request for additional information) of Tier 01 applications without having to wait for the monthly HAC meeting.

Because the Commission functions as a quasi-judicial body, applicants are directed to work with the Preservation Architect through the City prior to appearing before the Commission. This process helps ensure proposals are informed by the City's Historic Area Commission Design Guidelines and Standards and established preservation best practices.

Early coordination often results in stronger and more complete applications and supports a clear, consistent review process. The Preservation Architect also assists the City in verifying that approved work aligns with Commission decisions, helping safeguard the historic character and architectural integrity of the district while supporting the Commission in fulfilling its responsibilities under City Code.

6. Do you have any current openings on your Committee/Commission or Board?

There are currently no vacant positions on the Historic Area Commission.

7. Does the board/commission receive complaints directly? If so, how do you respond to them? If you receive complaints directly, please share them with the City Administrator.

Occasionally, members of the Commission are approached directly with complaints or concerns regarding properties within the Historic District. In those situations, I explain that the Historic Area Commission functions as a quasi-judicial body and therefore does not receive or process complaints directly, nor does it have enforcement authority.

To avoid ex parte communications and ensure matters are handled through the proper process, individuals are advised to direct complaints to the City Administrator. When concerns are raised informally to a commissioner, I notify the City Administrator so the matter can be documented and addressed through the appropriate administrative channels, and advise other members of the commission to do the same.

8. What are the plans and goals of the Board/Commission for 2026?

In 2026, the Historic Area Commission intends to continue strengthening its work in several key areas, including public guidance, preservation stewardship, and procedural clarity.

The Commission will continue working with the City Administrator, Preservation Architect, and City staff to improve the accessibility of information related to the Historic Review Certificate process. This includes updating and expanding resources on the City's Historic Area Commission webpage so that homeowners, contractors, realtors, and potential property buyers can more easily understand the requirements that apply within the historic district.

The Commission also plans to continue developing clear informational materials for applicants, where needed, similar to the business signage guidance created in 2025, in order to provide practical guidance early in the planning process and help applicants navigate the review process more efficiently.

Additionally, the Commission would like to hold a governance and procedural training session with the City Solicitor and City Administrator. Because the Historic Area Commission functions as a quasi-judicial body, it is important that members remain familiar with best practices related to procedural fairness, avoiding ex parte communications, maintaining impartiality, and recusal when appropriate.

Finally, the Commission will continue to support preservation initiatives that document and recognize the City's historic resources, including work associated with the Certified Local Government program and National Register nominations where appropriate. Through these efforts, the Commission aims to support responsible stewardship of the City's historic resources while ensuring that the review process remains clear, fair, and accessible to applicants.

9. Do you have any grant funding requests for outside grants and/or budget needs? If so please opine.

The Commission requests continued matching funds to support participation in the Certified Local Government (CLG) grant program.

CLG grants are administered through the State Historic Preservation Office and support projects such as historic resource documentation, National Register nominations, preservation planning, and public education initiatives.

Grant awards vary from year to year. Based on the FY 2024 CLG grant cycle (the most recent award received by the City), the City was awarded \$16,000. These grants require a 40% local match, which in that cycle totaled approximately \$6,600.

Providing matching funds allows the City to leverage relatively modest local funds to secure significantly larger federal preservation funding for projects that benefit the community and document the City's historic resources.

10. Please share your Fiscal Year 2027 Budget request.

The Commission requests the creation of a recurring budget line item of \$7,000 to provide the required local match for the annual Certified Local Government (CLG) grant program.

Establishing a dedicated match will allow the City to consistently pursue CLG funding opportunities each year and support preservation projects such as historic resource documentation, planning studies, and National Register nominations.

11. Is there anything that you would like to share not captured in the above?

In 2025, I served on the planning committee for the Vernacular Architecture Forum's annual conference, which was held in Delaware. The conference brought professionals from around the world, including architects, planners, historians, scholars, and archeologists, among others, to study and discuss the historic building traditions and cultural landscapes of Delaware.

Conference participants had the opportunity to attend tours in New Castle, Kent, and Sussex counties, and the tour of the City of New Castle had the highest level of interest and participation. Attendees underscored the unique opportunity to experience a historic district that retained so much integrity and character on a large scale, particularly in direct proximity to pedestrian visitors. I have since been contacted by several individuals who were unable to attend the tour but later returned to visit the City to experience its historic environment firsthand.

I was also in Washington, D.C. in early March with several of my fellow Preservation Delaware board members as part of National Historic Preservation Advocacy Week, meeting with members of Congress to discuss preservation policy and the importance of continued funding for the Historic Preservation Fund. This funding supports State Historic Preservation Offices and programs such as the Certified Local Government

(CLG) program, which directly benefits communities like New Castle. The high profile of New Castle as a Historic District was acknowledged by attendees in the Capital.

Because of its designation as a National Historic Landmark District and its listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the City of New Castle continues to attract national and international interest. This visibility highlights the importance of thoughtful stewardship and the City's ongoing commitment to protecting the historic and cultural resources that define the community.

The continued preservation of this nationally significant place is made possible through the efforts of many individuals, including City staff, elected officials, commissioners, and community members. I would like to extend my appreciation to everyone who contributes to the stewardship of the City's historic resources.

APPENDIX 01 – OVERALL STATISTICS - JANUARY 2025 TO FEBRUARY 2026

2025 to date (Month)	Total Reviews
Jan-25	8
Feb-25	15
Mar-25	18
Apr-25	14
May-25	16
Jun-25	18
Jul-25	14
Aug-25	21
Sep-25	24
Oct-25	17
Nov-25	9
Dec-25	14
Jan-26	6
Feb-26	5
TOTAL	199

Table 01 – Number of Applications Received

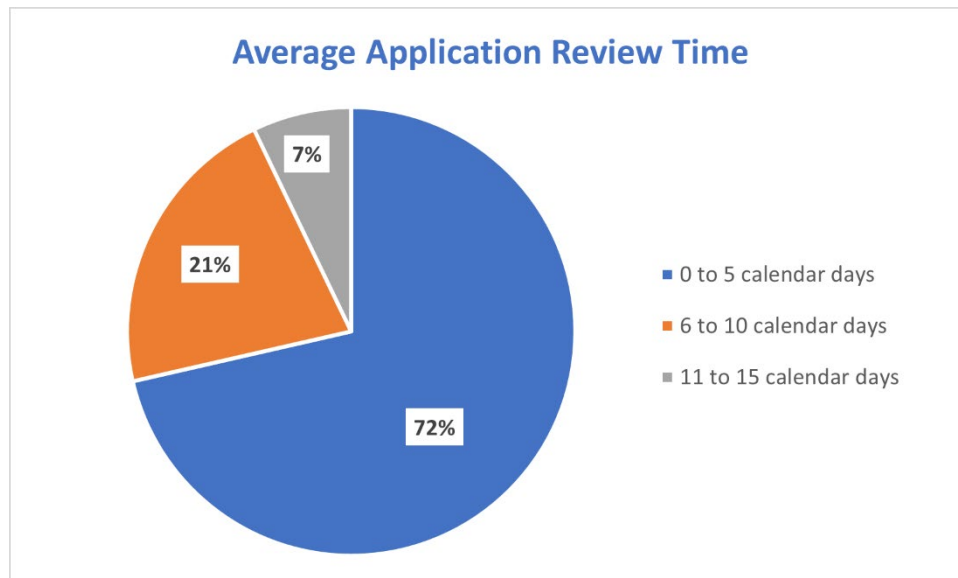


Chart 01 – Average Application Review Time

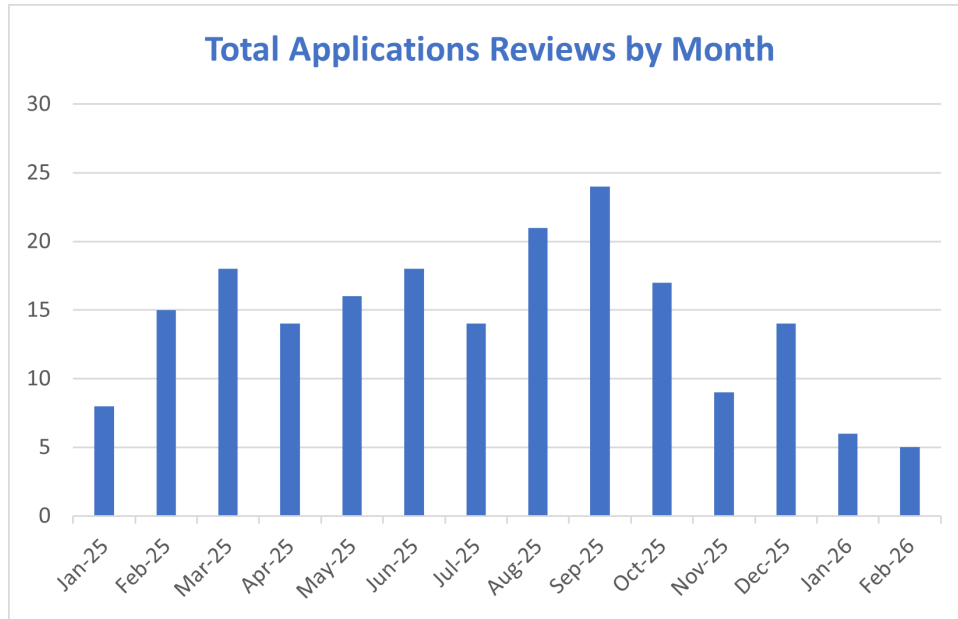


Chart 02 – Number of Applications Reviewed by Month - Graph

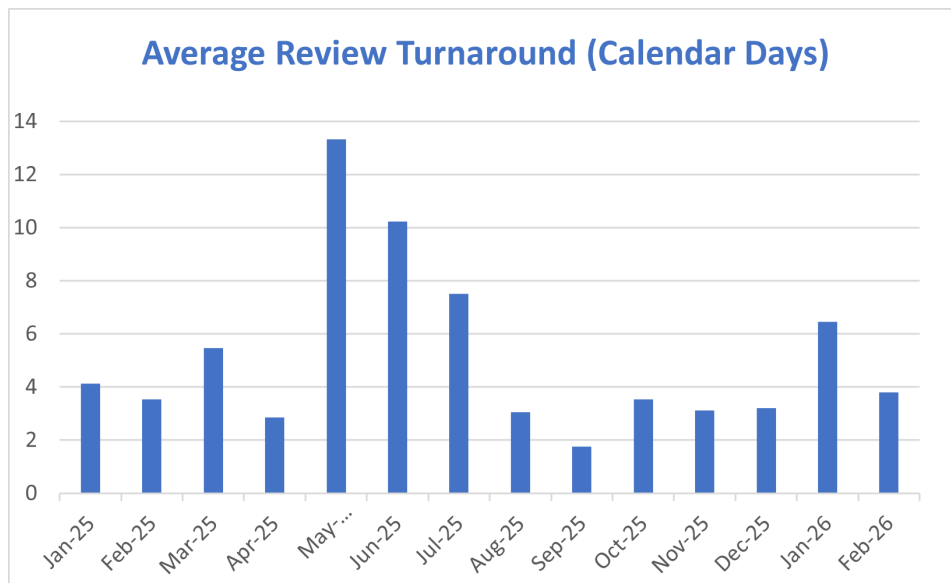


Chart 03 – Average Turnaround Time by Month
 (*Higher averages impacted by one or two singular applications review times)