

# The Boston Globe

## Going greener: Can historic preservation and climate initiatives ever play nice?

Climate change is at the forefront of most development conversations these days, and green policies are all about protecting real estate and people — not necessarily preserving the charm.

By **Cameron Sperance** Globe Correspondent, Updated June 14, 2023



ADOBE STOCK

Travelers (and home buyers) from around the world flock to Boston each year for its historic charm and architecture — a living textbook of the past dotted by

residential icons like the [Paul Revere House](#) and the [Victorian brownstones of the South End](#).

Expand beyond Boston and deeper into New England, and you find an eclectic swath of historic residential offerings from the shingled houses of Cape Cod to the mix of Federalist and Gilded architecture of Newport, R.I.

But face the facts: Sea levels are rising, climate change is at the forefront of most development conversations these days, and green initiatives are all about protecting real estate and people — not necessarily preserving the charm.

Can historic preservation and green initiatives ever play nice?

“They need to work together,” said [Henry Celli](#), a principal and senior architect at CBT. “We don’t have an option.”

Historic charm doesn’t always embrace the needs and requirements of today. It wasn’t until last year that Beacon Hill mapped out a plan toward replacing its gas-burning street lamps with more energy-efficient LED ones (Residents still [weren’t entirely sold](#) on the idea).

Back in 2014, a Beacon Hill neighborhood civic association filed a lawsuit against the City of Boston for installing ramps for people with disabilities because it put the neighborhood’s “unique and irreplaceable historic nature” in jeopardy, [the Globe reported](#).

This clash isn’t limited to Beacon Hill. Just look to Provincetown.

“There is a tension there,” said [Timothy Famulare](#), community development director. Provincetown is concerned with maintaining the “the dense and close feeling of our historic downtown, which is so key to our identity as a community but also to our own economy,” and to make downtown “more resilient in the face of rising floodwaters.”

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Erosion collapses a parking lot at Herring Cove Beach in Provincetown. JOHN TLUMACKI

The tension is evident with Provincetown's [Historic District Commission](#). "What we are seeing is, in some cases, there are homeowners who wish to elevate their homes to the appropriate height for the floodplain that they are in, but the Historic District Commission really puts a lot of pressure on them to go for the exemption," Famulare said.

Winter storms can flood Provincetown, and the town is studying how to protect itself. [Provincetown has 511 buildings on the National Register of Historic Places that are in flood hazard areas](#), according to the [Cape Cod Commission](#).

"The town has to adapt to survive," Famulare said. "The most sustainable way of maintaining a community that is vulnerable to sea level rise is through retreat. But we don't have the luxury of horizontal retreat. We have small lots, and much of the town is in the [National Seashore](#). ... Our only retreat is up."

It isn't entirely a case of conflicting missions between historic preservation and climate resiliency, however.

Michela Carew-Murphy is a member of both the Provincetown Historic District Commission and the [Coastal Resiliency Advisory Committee](#). “In order to preserve our historic district, we have to come up with green and resilient initiatives,” Carew-Murphy said. “Otherwise, what we’re fighting to defend will be underwater.”

But there also has to be a reasonable approach, as well as one that involves educating residents about grants that can help pay the cost of elevating their homes, she said. “What’s that going to look like? How do we keep the character of our town? How do we keep the character of these homes while moving them while also dealing with a town in which everything is so expensive?”

The debate is also playing out on Nantucket.

“Our experience really has mostly just been constantly having to remind them ... that we’re in the [flood] zone and we get three extra feet [of height],” said [Rebecca Berry](#), a principal at Finegold Alexander, which is renovating three single-family homes in a historic district. “There’s a lot of back and forth.”

And it’s more than rising sea levels at issue. Sometimes it’s the cost of going green.

While there is a push to move away from gas-powered [heating units and appliances](#), it isn’t always financially feasible when you are trying to create more affordable homes.

Leaders at [Capstone Communities](#) — a Newton-based residential developer with experience in a range of projects targeting affordable, mixed-income, and market-rate units — are optimistic technological developments will one day smooth over the financial friction between historic preservation and green initiatives.

But in the meantime, there must be compromises.

Capstone’s 57-unit [McElwain School Apartments development in Bridgewater](#) encompasses a former school building, as well as a newly built residential component that has an energy-efficient [passive house](#) designation. But there are limitations on how energy efficient the existing building can be.

“In an ideal world, we’d all want to use electricity throughout the school,” but that was financially prohibitive, said [Jason Korb](#), principal at Capstone Communities. Adding electrical heating units throughout the building would have required more insulation and wall retrofitting, Korb said. That would have driven up the cost on a project already utilizing Community Preservation Act funds, as well as federal and state historic tax credits, to make sense financially. So that would have meant higher rents for residents to cover the redevelopment cost.

With hope, better technology will tamp down some of the friction. Provincetown already has approved [Tesla solar-powered roofs](#) on some residences, Carew-Murphy said.

But those interviewed for this story also emphasized that just because a home is historic, that doesn’t make it an energy-gobbling clunker.

“Historic preservation is, at its core, environmentally friendly because in the school, think about everything that we save,” Korb said of the Bridgewater development. “Historic preservation needs to try to take a little bit more credit for the fact that it is environmentally sustainable.”

It also doesn’t have to be a case of either or.

“Everything seems scary when you don’t understand it,” Berry said. “But once you really have a chance to sit down and take a look through it, you understand that this doesn’t actually mean you have to tear out a window or make big material changes to facades,” Berry said. “Back Bay is still going look like the Back Bay.”

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