

# Historic Preservation Enhancement Grant- River Street

## Abstract

The City is seeking to study possibilities for adaptive reuse in the River Street National Register Historic District (NRHD), that would be applicable to other sites facing a similar combination of issues: remediation of contaminated land, adaptation to flood risks, and rehabilitation of historic resources. The River Street NRHD consists of both city- and privately-owned parcels. Many of its buildings are in poor physical shape, and some of the privately-owned properties are under threat of demolition. In order to preserve the historic district, it is critical that a feasible plan for reuse be devised before further damage can take place. The process will consist of hiring a consultant to conduct an economic feasibility study on potential reuse models, as well as engaging local stakeholders in assessing needs and desires for the area. The project will provide a set of models and practices that can be used in planning for future areas with similar conditions: historic importance, deteriorating physical conditions, and flood risk.

## 1. Issues addressed

The River Street NRHD consisted of twenty-six buildings at its establishment in 1978, bounded by River, Chapel, Blatchley, and Lloyd Streets, and the water. Today, only twelve buildings in the district remain, with various occupancy statuses. Several buildings are occupied and in successful use by different businesses, including Phoenix Press and Fair Haven Furniture. However, several remain in the derelict state. The significant reduction to the district was due to years of neglecting the buildings until they were physically unstable and had to be demolished. Now, the district is on its last legs. According to the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO)'s assessment, further demolitions might result in the loss of the River Street National historic designation. This would make the district's demise inevitable.

The City, alongside the SHPO, the Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP), neighborhood businesses, the New Haven Preservation Trust, and the Yale School of Architecture, is committed to preserving 198 River Street as the anchor of the district, while ensuring the historic fabric of the district as a whole remains intact.

There are three significant challenges that have prevented the redevelopment of this area thus far. The first challenge is the district's environmental contamination. Due to the district's industrial past, many parts of it are contaminated and require significant financial investment for remediation. Over the years, the City has completed environmental investigations, building material abatement/decontamination, removal of waste products and equipment, selective building demolition, and limited PCB cleanup actions. Additionally, the City is currently trying to secure State and Federal funding to complete the cleanup. However, there is a need to set realistic goals and point out possible future uses of the area in order to determine the appropriate cleanup scope and method. This could be established based on a feasibility study's conclusions. The second challenge for redevelopment of the site district is its location in an area of elevated flood risk. The 198 River Street site is identified in the FIRM as a Type AE Flood Zone Category with a Base Flood Elevation (BFE) of 11 feet, thus requiring special consideration of flooding mitigation and adaptation in the case of development. Based on a feasibility study, the city could develop guidelines for redevelopment in the district that could apply to other formerly-industrial waterfronts across the state. The third challenge is the deteriorating state of the historic resources in the district. For instance, an April 2020 Structural Conditions Assessment commissioned by the City determined that the buildings at 198 River St. are still salvageable, but only with large investments and quick action to redevelop them. Given the precarity of the status of the NRD designation, it is critical that the City intervene effectively to counter this deterioration.

This project aims to address the common combination of challenges for regeneration of historic industrial waterfronts: Remediation of contaminated land, adaptation to flood risks, and rehabilitation of historic resources. If funded, the grant will be utilized towards identifying different strategic, financial and logistical possibilities for addressing these issues.

## 2. Grant activities

The grant funds will be used towards conducting an adaptive reuse study on the River Street NRHD. It is in the interest of the city to preserve the area's historic urban fabric, and the best way to do so is to find a new use for the buildings. Such a study would consist of two components:

1. A community engagement process designed to center those who work and live in the surrounding area in the discussion about the different development scenarios and generate a dialogue to identify local needs that future plans should address and assets off of which any further development could build. A fruitful dialogue will help foster positive attitudes toward historic preservation in general, provide an opportunity to highlight the benefits of preservation, and create a space to discuss the future of light industry in the Fair Haven neighborhood.
2. An economic feasibility study focusing on the different redevelopment possibilities of historic industrial sites in the River Street NRD. The study will help identify possible models for the rehabilitation of the existing historic buildings within the district boundaries while taking into consideration flood adaptation, contamination remediation, and the restoration and reuse of historic properties to meet the needs of the Fair Haven neighborhood as established through the engagement process.

The needs and assets established by the engagement process will inform the economic feasibility analysis, and will be used by city staff in other neighborhood planning processes. In turn, the proposed models will be discussed by the community participants.

### 3. Goals/objectives of SHPO plan addressed

The SHPO Statewide Plan emphasizes the pursuit of nontraditional partnerships in preservation. Objectives #1 and #3 emphasize the ethos of “Shared Stewardship”, whereby communities beyond those traditionally involved in preservation are included in the preservation project at all stages and are given a sense of ownership over the outcome. The River Street district is located within a low-income, largely Hispanic area, and thus looks demographically quite different from the communities that are typically active in preservation activities. Moreover, residents are not necessarily aware of the historic background and importance of the district, and thus perceive the historic properties as merely vacant, blighted buildings that attract unwanted activities to their neighborhood and block their access to the waterfront. However, the neighborhood is very well-organized, with community organizations and leaders garnering support for a wide variety of projects, including ones focused on stormwater management issues. Community groups could mobilize in support of a plan for preservation that addressed environmental and economic issues. Additionally, education and outreach activities about the area’s industrial history would be supported by the organizations whose work comprises making a sense of place in the area, such as through the annual festivals. Thus, this grant could serve to enrich and expand partnerships, as well as diversifying the audience of preservation projects.

Objective #4, the development of a resiliency strategy for historic resources, is also addressed by this project. Most of the River Street NRHD is located within the AE floodplain, at the confluence of the Mill and Quinnipiac Rivers. As sea level rises, these sites, and the largely residential areas behind them, will be at elevated flood risk. As such, preserving the historic district through creative adaptive reuse methods could provide resiliency benefits to the surrounding area as well. This tactic of “green preservation” would ensure the continued survival of the historic industrial urban fabric into the future, while also developing support and appreciation for preservation among those interested primarily in floodwater management.

### 4. Funding priorities addressed

The project addresses the priority of developing/updating design guidelines for historic districts. By developing possible models for adaptive reuse of brownfield sites in floodplains in low-income areas,

this grant could lead to sustainable development becoming far more common on these types of sites throughout the state. A thorough study of remediation possibilities must be undertaken with economic conditions kept in mind, resulting in a better understanding of feasible options that could serve to inform design choices for historic resources facing similarly difficult circumstances. Thus, new design guidelines would be produced for historic sites, areas, and resources, targeted at the specific, though common, combination of circumstances present at the site: contamination, flood risk, and deteriorating historic resources.

The second priority the project seeks to address is incorporating historic preservation into town-wide planning. While the City of New Haven is already very preservation-positive, much of the preservation activity within the city is concentrated in certain neighborhoods. Here, the preservation push will explicitly seek to address the desires and needs of those who live and work in the area, integrating the study into a larger planning process for the Fair Haven neighborhood.. This project presents an opportunity to bring a preservation project to Fair Haven, involve different stakeholders in the decision process, and inform future efforts at community-driven preservation in the City.

## 5. Project beneficiaries

The project stands to benefit a wide variety of stakeholders. Most directly, it will benefit those who live and work in the area immediately surrounding it. Residents of Fair Haven, the area in which this site is located, highlighted a preponderance of empty buildings as a central issue in the 2001 Fair Haven Neighborhood Plan, a concern that was reflected in the 2002 River St. MDP as well. By creating a plan for reuse of this area, it will be possible to recover the buildings from dereliction and preserve the district from further blight. In addition, more public-facing uses will allow public access to the waterfront, another goal established in the 2001 Neighborhood Plan. It is an issue of environmental justice that remediation be addressed here, as Fair Haven has a disproportionate amount of environmental stressors such as CSOs already. Those who work in the surrounding area will benefit from the beautification just as residents will, and more jobs will likely be created in this area, benefitting the economic vibrancy of the neighborhood.

A well-preserved district will add cultural value to the area. It presents an opportunity to maintain the memory of New Haven's past as an industrial hub at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This will create a stronger sense of place in the area, building connectivity between the neighborhood as it exists today and its past.

## 6. Benefit to public preservation awareness

The project will result in a plan that will bring a series of existent desired outcomes to the community with a preservation effort. In the 2001 Fair Haven Neighborhood Plan, residents expressed a desire to eliminate vacant buildings and lots, as did the writers of the 2002 River Street MDP. There are a great number of vacant buildings in the River Street district, and a plan for preservation that results in their occupancy will likely develop support for preservation among neighbors. A federal historic designation can yield tax credits of around 45% of project costs. This greatly incentivizes developers to restore and adapt a building. Conversely, without this historic designation, there likely won't be the incentive to remediate and redevelop the polluted buildings.

Similarly, neighbors have expressed a desire for greater waterfront access in Fair Haven, with two parks on each corner of the peninsula clamoring to be connected by a waterfront walkway. The 2002 River Street Municipal Development Plan designed an elegant greenway on the waterfront, but

pedestrian access to the waterfront is still blocked by privately-owned largely-abandoned parcels.. Remediating the buildings on the waterfront and attracting more public-facing uses would result in greater public waterfront access. This, too, would create support for historic preservation by showing the symbiosis between the goal of preservation and other goals in the neighborhood. The waterfront view would highlight the industrial character of the historic district, creating a connection between the image of the waterfront and the historic memory of the area.

## 7. Impact and long-term benefits to the CLG

The adaptive reuse study will encourage preservation-friendly investment in the River Street NRHD. As such, it will present an opportunity to protect the cultural heritage of the industrial area. If the area were to remain abandoned, many of the buildings would likely crumble and/or require demolition. By presenting compelling uses, the study will provide alternatives that will allow such a fate to be avoided.

The study will also provide models for adaptive reuse of districts with the challenges of brownfield remediation, flood risk, and low commercial demand. This suite of challenges applies to several other areas across the city, and will apply to more districts in the long term due to climate change. This could also benefit other cities around Connecticut and the region.

## 8. Lasting impacts of project on historic resources

River Street NRD is the best surviving example of New Haven's industrial heritage. New Haven played a key role in American industrial history, as the center of gun and carriage manufacturing at the end of the 19th century and the home of major innovations like the cotton gin. Much of the city's population was directly employed by the booming industrial sector, with the population growing from 40,000 at the beginning of the Civil War to 108,000 by the turn of the 20th century. The landscape of New Haven at the height of this industrial age was thus dotted with factories, railroads, smokestacks, and cargo ships.

After World War II, factories began to close down and manufacturing in New Haven slowed as production moved elsewhere around the globe and technological advancements made existing products obsolete. The Bigelow Complex at 198 River Street is one of the last physical remnants of New Haven's once ubiquitous industrial landscape, and thus it is critical that what remains of the complex be preserved. This is not to say that New Haven's industrial heritage should be idolized in the history of New Haven- while this period brought prosperity for many families and great capital into the city, it is imperative to recognize that such success was dependent on US colonial and imperial conquests, from the dispossession of Native American lands to the harmful extraction of resources in the Global South. While the industrial history of New Haven is certainly fraught, it is perhaps all the more reason to make sure it is not forgotten, so that discussion around the narrative may continue and past mistakes not made again. This history has undeniably shaped New Haven into the city it is today. In other words, to lose the properties such as the Bigelow Complex is to lose history, and thus as much of the remaining historic fabric must be preserved.

Conducting a feasibility study will help the city envision the future of this area, develop a holistic strategy, and construct the appropriate financial mechanisms to catalyze the regeneration of the River Street NRHD as a whole and 198 River St as its anchor.

## 9. Project management

The project will be managed by the City Plan Department, in conjunction with the Economic Development Administration. Aicha Woods, the Executive Director of the City Plan Department, will oversee the work at large.

## 10. Deliverables

This grant will help fund a feasibility study focusing on adaptive uses of historic resources, estimation of rehabilitation costs, cleanup regulations and costs, and adaptation to flood-related risks. The study's conclusions will be used to develop design guidelines, financial mechanisms, stewardship, and PPP agreements, and community outreach strategies to design, support, and actualize the revival of the River Street NRHD.

## 11. Sharing the grant-product with the public

The project, an adaptive reuse study, will be shared through the public in numerous ways. It will be available on the New Haven City Plan Department's website, with other "Plans and Projects": [https://www.newhavenct.gov/gov/depts/city\\_plan/plans\\_n\\_projects/default.htm](https://www.newhavenct.gov/gov/depts/city_plan/plans_n_projects/default.htm). Additionally, the project will be shared through a noticed public hearing at the Board of Alders. It will also be presented to the Fair Haven Community Management Team, an organization that serves as a liaison between the Fair Haven neighborhood and the city government. The results of the study will be discussed in a Historic District Commission meeting. The City Plan Department will share the results of the study through various community organizations active in Fair Haven such as the Chatham Square Association. Following the creation of the report, the City will create a StoryMap explaining the results of the study, which will be shared on social media.

Importantly, the adaptive reuse study is not the end of the community engagement process. The City will continue to consult with residents and other stakeholders regarding the future of the area in determining which developers to support, what types of uses to attract, and how to program the public space in the area. Following "Shared Stewardship" principles, community members should be equal partners co-leading the preservation process along with City officials. The grant-funded product will serve as a ground upon which to build a partnership to save the district.

## 12. Success and Impact Measurement

One immediate measure of success is if the resulting proposal from this study is able to attract developers. Thus far, the city has had difficulty attracting developers to the River Street area, and a creative adaptive reuse method will likely be able to entice greater investment. Success would also entail leveraging the development to maintain the designation of the River Street district on the National Register of Historic Places. Many buildings in the area have been demolished in recent years, and a preservation effort is necessary to ensure that the character of the district is sufficiently maintained. The influx of capital from greater development would hopefully make this effort possible.

More broadly, success entails the imagining of a reuse that benefits the community, develops the economy, and preserves the historic resources. The community would benefit from fewer abandoned buildings in the neighborhood, particularly if they were converted to community-oriented spaces, such as a restaurants or art galleries, or provided employment to neighboring residents. The district is located in a low-income neighborhood, and as such economic investment could be, if properly

harnessed, a catalyst for inclusive growth. If the architecture could be preserved in this district, it could perhaps produce an effective model for historic preservation of industrial architecture in lower-income neighborhoods more broadly, in line with SHPO's goal of expanding partnerships beyond traditional preservationist communities.

Fundamentally, success involves creating a plan for adaptive reuse that preserves the area's character, remediates the contamination, and mitigates flooding.

## Photographs

A comparison of the streetscape from the 1970s to now, showing how much of the fabric has been demolished, while some exciting elements remain

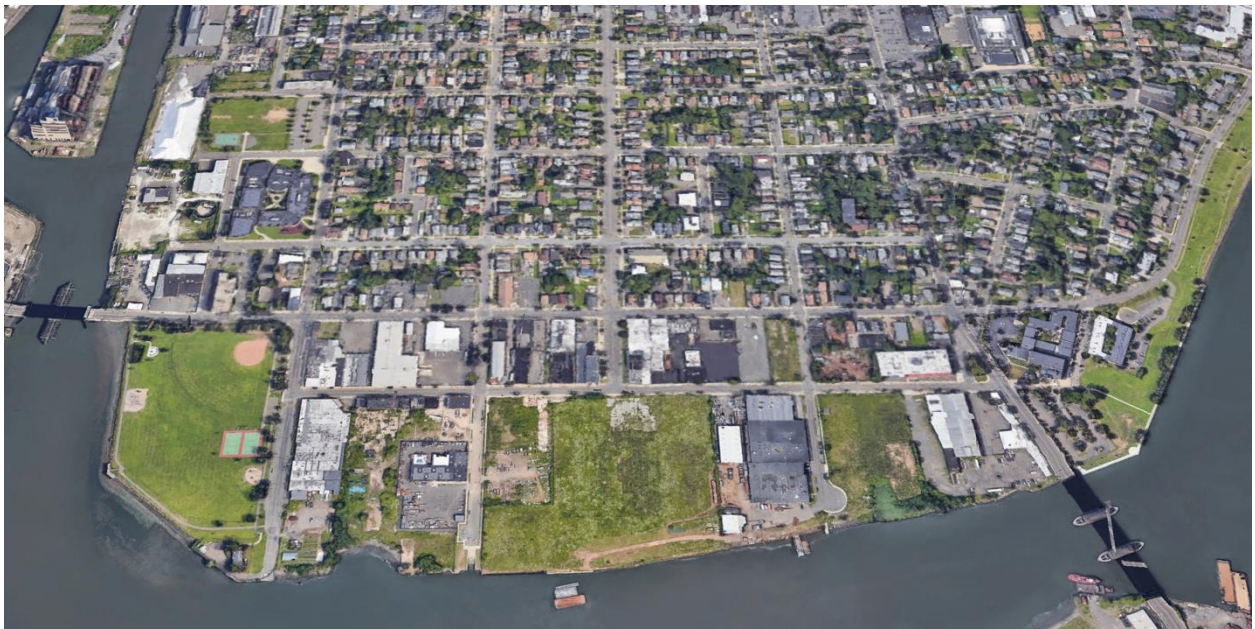




A late 19<sup>th</sup> century image of the River Street area



A similar perspective on Google Earth



## Tentative project timeline

- August 5, 2020: Application review by SHPO
- By September 31, 2020: Finalize hiring of a consultant firm
- By October 31, 2020: Notify and present the project in the relevant city commissions and community management teams
- By March 31, 2021: Consultants complete a full draft of the study report after conducting community engagement process as will be decided with key stakeholders. The report will be posted for public comments for 30 days.
- By May 30, 2021: Finalize the study report based on public comments and publish in different online platforms.
- By June 30, 2021: Publish RFQ based on the report aiming to get competitive proposals for the redevelopment of different sites within the River St NRHD and its surrounding area.

## Budget

	Grant Share	Applicant Share	Total
Consultant Fees (list type of consultant)	15000		15000
Supplies			
Printing/Copying	1000		1000
Postage			
Advertising	1000		1000
Other (Specify) Compensation for participants in community meetings or workshop	3000		3000
Total	20000		20000

## Budget Narrative

- Consultant Fees: Support the hiring of a consulting firm with expertise in industrial waterfront rehabilitation to conduct an adaptive reuse study in a timely manner
- Printing/Copying: Design, print and distribution of outreach materials
- Other:
  - Translation to Spanish of outreach materials, online story map, handouts
  - Compensation for time and effort for participants