

# Survey of Massachusetts Municipal Historical Commissions Websites

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Created By: Devon T. King

Masters Student, Public History

University of Massachusetts Amherst

# Table of Contents

<b>Project Overview</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Summary of Findings</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Examples of Highly-Rated Commission Websites</b>	<b>7</b>
• Mendon Historical Commission	7
• Holyoke Historical Commission	7
• Salem Historical Commission	8
<b>Commission Websites “Best Practices” Guide</b>	<b>9</b>
• Basic Information:	9
• Resources:	10
• Supplementary Information:	10

## Project Overview

During the Fall and Winter of 2020, each town and city's historical (or where applicable historic district) commission<sup>1</sup> website in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts was surveyed and categorized according to the following criteria:

- None:** Denoting a community which has a website but the LHC appears to have no website.
- Minimal:** LHC page includes minimal info such as a list of commissioner names only, address of where commission meetings are held, basic meeting information, and at least a brief explanation of the LHC.
- Adequate:** LHC page includes information in the above category as well as up-to-date agendas, minutes, direct contact information such as email addresses, an explanation of the LHC's role which goes beyond a quotation of relevant Massachusetts General Law, and resources related to local history and relevant preservation organizations.
- High:** LHC page includes information in the above category as well as information related to preservation bylaws, applications/forms, public outreach programs, design guidelines, maps of local historic districts, and other comprehensive information.

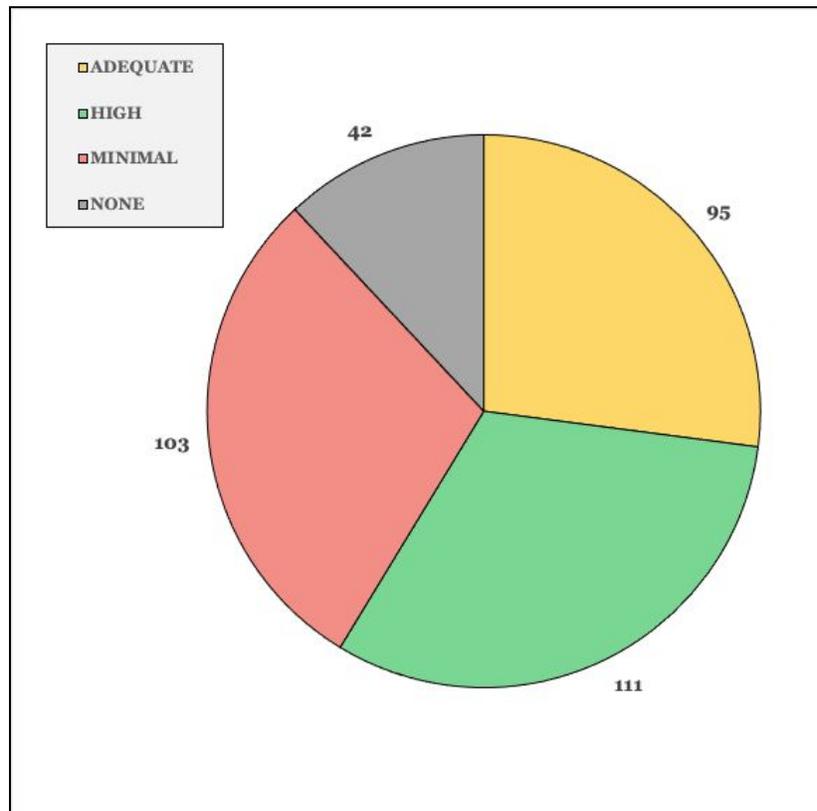
Along with the above criteria, a variety of factors played a role in the categorization, including: Ease of navigation and ability of find documents such as Certificate of Appropriateness and Demolition Delay forms; the availability of meeting documents, particularly meeting minutes; where applicable, visible links to a community's historic district commission (and vice versa on the community's LHDC webpage); and, the general degree to which the website information is up-to-date with regards to agendas, meeting minutes, "recent projects" pages, and other relevant pages.

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<sup>1</sup> For communities with separate historical commissions and historic district commissions, only the historical commission was surveyed. The degree of information on a communities' historic district commission was noted where applicable. LHC refers to both "Local Historical Commission" and "Local Historical District Commission."

## Summary of Findings

The survey revealed that, among the 351 towns and cities of Massachusetts 42 either did not have a historical commission or did not have an active website for their commission; 103 websites were rated as “minimal”; 95 were rated as “adequate”; and, 111 were rated as “high.” It should be noted that these ratings cut across a range of communities. That is, towns and cities which



may not have a high amount of activity or programming did not necessarily receive a low rating compared to communities who carry out a high level of programming.

Of the 319 communities who did have a functioning commission website, the top three areas of concern were:

**Lack of Information:** Commissions who did have webpages either did not include an explanation of the commission, a list of members, direct contact information, or relevant forms and applications. In some cases, webpages such as FAQs referenced by-laws, forms, and other documentation that were not found on the commission’s website. While some commission websites had a high amount of local history resources (e.g. links to

online archives, pages detailing community history, etc.), they did not have information on the commission's role or resources such as forms and regulatory documents.

**Outdated Information:** While a majority of webpages rated as either "Adequate" or "High," the information on these webpages was found to be outdated, sometimes by many years. In some cases, commissions had RFPs and other documents from nearly ten years ago. The issue of outdated information was the most common issue found across all commission webpages, no matter their rating.

Related to this issue, some commissions which operate a separate website from their town/community did not have continuity across the separate sites. That is, the information provided on a town's commission webpage was in some cases different and/or outdated from the information provided on the separate commission website.

**Ease of Navigation:** For the most part, commission websites were found to be easy to navigate, with pages and immediate information (e.g., contact information, list of members, commission overview, etc.) readily accessible. In some cases however, resources such as forms and by-laws and agendas and meeting minutes were tucked within pages and/or FAQ areas not immediately titled to help users understand where to quickly and easily find information. Related to this issue, some commission websites could not be easily found within the broader town/city website.



## Examples of Highly-Rated Commission Websites

The following are examples of three commission websites which rated “High.” The communities served by these commissions range from small, rural towns to the Commonwealth’s larger cities and are managed on various hosting services.

### [Mendon Historical Commission](#)

Beginning with an overview of the background and role of the Commission - including a clearly visible email contact link - and list of members, the well laid out webpage provides readily accessible menu of sub-pages, contact information (including relevant town staff contact), FAQs on screen left, and a “News and Announcements” section, meeting calendar, and links to agendas through January 2021 as well as meeting minutes through 2019 on screen right. Subpages provide information on cultural sites relevant to the Commission’s activities - including the Blackstone Valley National Heritage Corridor - as well as information on the town’s demolition delay bylaw, historic plaque program, local history resources, and links to MHC, MACRIS, and importantly the town’s Historic District Commission. While some information such as meeting minutes and information on current projects/news is outdated, the Mendon Historical Commission’s website is an effective example of how even a relatively small community can maintain an effective webpage that provides detailed, relevant information.

### [Holyoke Historical Commission](#)

While not hosted on the typically-used CivicPlus platform, Holyoke’s Historical Commission website provides an easy-to-navigate experience for users as well as relevant resources in a concise fashion. The webpage begins with a comprehensive overview of the commission's history and expands upon a simple quotation of the MGL Ch. 40 definition to explain the body’s role and responsibilities. Screen left provides a short menu to subpages with the commission’s list of members (with direct email links for several members); meeting minutes through January 2020; and links to resources related to local historical research, property owner resources, and relevant preservation

organizations. Links on the landing page include the city's 2017 preservation plan, by-laws and demolition delay ordinance, and historic district commission, and Community Preservation Act committee.

### [Salem Historical Commission](#)

A prime example of how a historical commission for a relatively larger community in the commonwealth maintains their online presence, Salem's Historical Commission is a very organized website. Below a drop-down "Contact Information" menu at the top of the landing page is urgent information and guidance regarding the commission's application system. Below this, the list of commission members and relevant city staff contact is found, with email links for the staff contact and City Council Liaison member. On screen left, an expansive list of subpages provide information on the city's 2015 preservation plan, commission annual reports, various reports related to preservation projects, information on Local Historic Districts and National Register properties, design guidelines, downloadable forms and applications, and - notably - an information page on the commission's 2021 meeting schedule with application deadlines. The "Useful Links" page provides links to state, federal, and private preservation resources as well as information for property owners on energy efficiency, weatherization, and windows. On screen right, a meeting calendar, links to agendas through January 2021 and meeting minutes through December 2020 are readily available.

## Commission Websites “Best Practices” Guide

Use the guide below to assist in formatting and/or creating your commission’s website to better assist community members, consultants, property owners, and other relevant parties in finding the resources and information they need.

### **Basic Information:**

- ❖ **Ensure your landing page** (the page users initially view) includes a clear and concise explanation of the role the LHC plays in your community, including information on:
  - ❑ How the commission differs from a historical society or like organization in the community; and
  - ❑ The purview of the commission and its responsibilities vis-à-vis historic preservation.

While including relevant MGL links and resources is important, simply quoting relevant excerpts does not explain what your commission does to promote and steward your community’s historic resources.

- ❖ **When providing contact information**, be sure to include an email address or contact intake form to ensure multiple ways to contact your commission. If appropriate, include the contact information for the relevant municipal personnel who work with your commission to handle issues like Demolition Delay, or who may serve as the Primary Contact for the commission.
- ❖ **Commission members** should be clearly identified, either on the landing page or on a separate, visibly accessible subpage. List of members should include up-to-date term expiration years as well as links to emails (where applicable). Notices of openings should be clearly marked at the top of a commission webpage.
- ❖ **Meeting information** should be clearly visible on the landing page, and include typical meeting times as well as information on accessing any online

meeting portal, if meetings are being held online.

## **Resources:**

- ❖ **Agendas and Minutes** should be clearly visible, either as links on the landing page, or accessible through a subpage. If your commission utilizes a central repository to store town/city agendas and minutes, be sure to provide a clearly visible link on your landing page to that repository. To the greatest extent possible, all agendas and minutes should be available and accessible to users.
  
- ❖ **By-laws and regulatory information** relevant to your commission should be clearly accessible on a subpage, with working links to forms and other documents necessary for users. As with the “role and responsibilities” section of your commission website, information on regulations such as Demolition Delay should not simply quote from MGL as this does not provide readily useful information to users on how to go about such processes in your town/city. If your commission utilizes processes like Certificate of Appropriateness and Demolition Delay, you should clearly note how to submit such documents before the commission as well as when deadlines are in relation to meetings.
  
- ❖ **Commission documents** such as preservation plans, inventories of historic properties, and annual reports should be compiled in a clearly visible subpage or pages. Documents no longer necessary to the day-to-day activities of the commission, such as RFPs for which the deadline has passed, should be taken down and archived.

## **Supplementary Information:**

- ❖ Where appropriate, **recent projects and activities** should be explained in a concise manner on either the landing page or on a separate subpage. Such information should be kept up-to-date so as to provide users with accurate information about the current activities of the commission and the status of projects.