The Threat to Atlanta’s Eligible Historic Neighborhoods

By Sarah Brooks

Proposed neighborhoods eligible for the National Register of Historic Places may no longer qualify for the protection given to already-listed historic districts. Currently, the definition of a historic neighborhood in Ordinance Sec-15-06.001(t) reads: “Historic Neighborhood: Any neighborhood which is listed on or is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places established by the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended.”

Howard Shook, an Atlanta City Councilman, proposed the removal of the phrase “or is eligible for listing...” from the ordinance. See proposed ordinance here. This phrase, though small, can have grave consequences on the preservation of historic neighborhoods.

According to Patrick Berry and Kristen Halloran, many potential historic neighborhoods, particularly along the BeltLine, are at risk of losing their character-defining features. While being listed on the National Register does not automatically provide legal protection for the historic neighborhood, it does allow owners to apply for federal tax funding and tax credits if the homeowner chooses to follow certain standards set by the U.S. Secretary of the Interior.

The Subdivision Ordinance is really what gives neighborhoods more protection. According to Subdivision Ordinance Sec. 15-08.005(d)(6), “In all historic neighborhoods . . . all new lots shall conform to existing lot layout, patterns, and design, including, without limitation, orientation of lots to public streets.”

Subdivision, such as lot size, set backs, and building orientations, define various neighborhoods providing individuals unique living and visiting experiences. Walkable neighborhoods with controlled infrastructure are much more livable and pleasant than overcrowded and unplanned buildings.

Why does this policy change proposal matter? Because numerous historic Atlanta neighborhoods are eligible for the National Registry yet many lack the resources to do the research and complete the nomination process. These eligible neighborhoods, in the meantime, are losing their charm and unique characteristics that define Atlanta’s distinct neighborhoods because there is no incentive or protections in place to keep them the way they are.

Sarah Brooks is a native of Savannah, GA and graduated from UNC at Asheville with a B.A. in Literature. Sarah is currently pursuing her Juris Doctor at Georgia State University College of Law. After graduating college in 2009, Sarah moved to New Zealand to become a scuba diving instructor. The following year she backpacked around Southeast Asia before returning home and applying to law school. While in law school, Sarah did policy research at a non-profit consumer advocacy organization called Georgia Watch. Sarah is also a registered mediator and spent last year mediating landlord/tenant disputes at the Fulton County Courthouse. She currently serves as the Content Director at a local tech startup.