

A Quarterly Journal of  
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# Alliance

the  
review

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# We Need To Talk: New Language For Local Preservation

by Cindy Olnick

Imagine a world where, when it comes to preservation, everyone knows what you're talking about. Where elected officials, colleagues, property owners, and community members understand what historic preservation is, how it works, and why it matters – even if they don't always agree with you. An NAPC project now under way will help us start building that world, one message at a time.

The Advocacy Support for NAPC Members project will offer clear, cohesive language to help local preservation programs address the most important issues you face. In this context, "advocacy" means anything that promotes the interests of preservation programs and commissions. "Often, local historic preservation programs must advocate consistently for their value and relevance – even continued existence – in the communities they serve," reads the "Advocacy" page on the NAPC website ([napcommissions.org](http://napcommissions.org)). This project will help local programs advocate for yourselves, your programs, and your communities.

We've been making the case for preservation for decades. Many of you have effective strategies for communicating and engaging stakeholders. Yet negative perceptions persist, and many of you bear the brunt of them every day. "We need a positive, forward-looking, up-to-date way of talking about all the possibilities of local preservation programs," says Betsy Bradley, chair of NAPC's Advocacy Committee. "We need better messaging and words that make sense to everyday people."

This project offers a new approach to preservation messaging based on proven principles of narrative strategy. While not a quick fix, this approach can help you have more productive conversations, demystify the process, and start positioning your work as the positive, collaborative effort that it is. We launched the project at last year's FORUM conference in Cincinnati and will deliver content this spring. While designed for programs at the local level, the language should prove useful to anyone involved in preserving historic places.

## **We Asked, You Delivered**

To help you address the most important issues you face, we needed to know what they are. Many thanks to everyone who shared your thoughts at FORUM in the "We Need to Talk" session and/or at our table in the lobby. We also listened in on separate but similar roundtable discussions.

The session and table comments alone identified nearly fifty issues that run the gamut from capacity, compliance, and construction costs to loss of zoning control, lack of internal trust and support, and



Photo by Paula Mohr

**FORUM guests weigh in on their most important issues, in the “We Need to Talk” session (with Cindy Olnick at the podium).**

the need for diversity, equity, inclusion, accessibility, and other systemic changes in the field. We analyzed all the comments at face value and in terms of underlying themes and root causes.

Among the issues that this project can directly address, nine emerged as the most common or urgent:

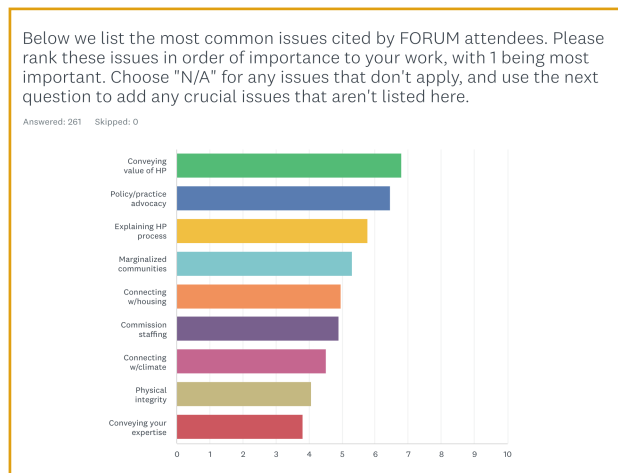
- Conveying the value of preservation: why it’s important, how it benefits communities
- Explaining the local preservation process: how it works, how people can/should interact with it
- Advocating for more effective preservation policies and practices (or better implementation of existing policies)
- Engaging and serving underrepresented communities
- Connecting preservation with affordable housing and density
- Connecting preservation with climate action, energy efficiency, and sustainability
- Recognizing and protecting sites that lack physical integrity
- Conveying the value of your specific role and expertise
- Recruiting, retaining, and/or diversifying your local preservation commission/board

For the purposes of this project, we did not include funding, which we knew would top the list and might siphon off responses that the project could

more directly address; or skills and training, which NAPC handles separately. Yet the language we provide will help you make the case for funding, and your feedback will inform future NAPC training.

We asked NAPC members and FORUM attendees to prioritize these issues using an online survey. The survey posed the same basic question, “What issues matter most to you?” in different ways, including ranking the importance of those listed above. We also asked which audiences (e.g., elected officials, property owners, community members) were most directly involved in or affected by various issues, how these audiences perceived the issues (to the best of their knowledge), and specifically what the audiences had to say.

More than 260 people completed the survey—if you were one of them, thank you! And congratulations to Steve Garvan, Vice-Chair of the City of Sandpoint, Idaho’s Arts, Culture, and Historic Preservation Commission, who won our drawing for a one-year NAPC membership! Respondents hail from nearly every state in the U.S., and more than two-thirds work in a local preservation program (split almost evenly between staff and commissions/review boards). They offered nearly 900 comments, all of which we analyzed and categorized.



Source: SurveyMonkey

**The most common or urgent issues cited at FORUM, ranked by survey respondents in order of importance. Weighted averages (numbers at the bottom) reflect the relative importance of the issues to each other. The options were randomized so respondents wouldn’t see them in the same order.**

	1
Conveying value of HP	30.65% 80
Policy/practice advocacy	19.54% 51
Explaining HP process	10.34% 27
Marginalized communities	8.43% 22
Connecting w/climate	8.05% 21
Connecting w/housing	7.66% 20
Commission staffing	6.90% 18
Conveying your expertise	4.60% 12
Physical integrity	3.07% 8

**From the same survey question, the percentage (and number) of respondents citing each issue as the most important. More than thirty percent cited “Conveying the value of preservation” as their top concern.**

Source: SurveyMonkey

### Top Issue: Conveying the Value of Preservation

Regardless of how we asked the question, respondents consistently cited three issues as the most important:

- Conveying the value of preservation
- Explaining the local preservation process
- Advocating for more effective preservation policies and practices (or better implementation of existing ones)

The question on order of importance used weighted averages to gauge the relative importance of issues to each other. The options were randomized so respondents wouldn't see them in the same order. While these rankings appear close, we also evaluated how many people considered each issue the most important. “Conveying the value of preservation” was by far the chief concern, chosen by more than thirty percent of respondents.

These top issues may seem obvious and broad, yet they reflect how fundamental needs in local preservation remain unmet. They also offer the opportunity to use more specific issues, e.g., affordable housing, to illustrate larger points, and they overlap in ways that allow for mutual reinforcement, e.g., explaining not just how a process works, but why it works the way it does. The

survey also confirmed common knowledge about how different stakeholders relate to these issues in different ways. Respondents provided invaluable examples and language to help tailor messages to key audiences.

### Waving the Magic Wand

We also asked, “If you could change one thing today about how you talk about or advocate for your work, what would it be?” Again, we saw a vast range of opinions. Just a few of the 160 responses included:

- *Having people respect our importance and authority.*
- *More dynamic ways to tell the historic preservation story.*
- *Being better able to convey that preservation is an important economic development strategy, not just about paint colors.*
- *Convincing history interested people that being on [the] commission has value.*
- *The ability to tour [a] site before voting; open meeting law prevents this, [we have to] vote by photos.*
- *More accessible language for the general public.*
- *The ability to be more inclusive.*
- *Being able to bridge the connection between “why it matters” and “why it should be protected.”*
- *Impressing on owners of historic properties the importance of proper, regular maintenance.*
- *I would find a way to explain that do want to preserve our community’s history, but that I am constrained by the way the law is written.*
- *Be more hopeful.*

And my personal favorite:

- *Everyone would know what I’m talking about.*

Messaging isn't a magic wand. Yet, when done well, it plays a key role in making these and other wishes come true.

### A New Approach to an Old Problem

There is no shortage of information about the



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 National Alliance of Preservation Commissions  
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You can also join online at <http://napcommissions.org/join>

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City	<input type="text"/>	State	<input type="text"/>	Zip	<input type="text"/>
Phone/Fax	<input type="text"/>	E-mail	<input type="text"/>		
How did you hear about NAPC?	<input type="text"/>				

Become part of the national network of local preservation, historic district, and landmark commissions and boards of architectural review. Organized to help local preservation programs succeed through education, advocacy, and training, the National Alliance of Preservation Commissions is the only national nonprofit organization dedicated to local preservation commissions and their work. NAPC is a source of information and support for local commissions and serves as a unifying body giving them a national voice. As a member of NAPC, you will benefit from the experience and ideas of communities throughout the United States working to protect historic districts and landmarks through local legislation, education, and advocacy.

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  - Federal Agencies
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**PROFESSIONAL NETWORK**

**\$150 PROFESSIONAL NETWORK**

- Consultants /Consulting Firms
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In addition to receiving all NAPC membership benefits, Professional members are listed in the NAPC Professional Network Directory at <http://napcommissions.org/directory>.

*\* Membership includes all commission members and staff. Please provide complete list of members with names, phone numbers and email address for additional digital copies.*

**PREMIUM MEMBERSHIP**

Half of all premium membership dues support NAPC's student internship and Forum scholarship programs

- \$250 CHAIRS CIRCLE**
- \$500 FOUNDERS CIRCLE**

Please return this form with payment to NAPC: PO Box 1011, Virginia Beach, VA 23451