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Historic & Green in Connecticut

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If you believe what you read in [some papers](#) historic preservation is a dead and dying movement, unable to adapt to modern challenges, including climate change.

The truth is, there are many preservationists who see the need to forge common ground with non-preservationists. This growing sentiment was on full display a few weeks ago at unique gathering of nearly two hundred preservationists and environmentalists in Hartford, Connecticut. The occasion? The “Historic and Green: A New Climate Agenda” conference cosponsored by the State Historic Preservation Office, the Connecticut Chapter of the American Planning Association, Preservation Connecticut, and UConn Law School.



The author, Sara Bronin, opens the day by framing the issues before an audience of nearly 200 people. | Credit: Spencer A. Sloan Photography

The conference [focused on what a state might do to harmonize the preservation and environmental agendas](#). It consisted of a series of panels and mini-lectures, punctuated by leaders of prominent advocacy organizations providing their perspective on needed policy improvements. We were honored that six legislators, including State Majority Leader Matt Ritter, spent an hour and a half responding to attendees' ideas and questions. We closed with an open discussion setting out a framework for state legislative advocacy in the coming years. You can watch video of the conference (with the exception of the final session) [here](#).

We came together because we all recognize the urgent existential threat of climate change, and because we know we have to work together to do something about it. We have a lot in common. Both movements oppose the waste of materials associated with needless demolition, while also heralding the energy efficiency inherent in homes built before the 1940s. All agree that resiliency and disaster planning are essential in protecting our most distinctive neighborhoods.

But it has sometimes been hard to get these groups actively engaging with each other on the statewide or national levels.

Part of the issue is that we have become over-reliant on local governments to weigh preservation and environmental values. Across the country, we leave it to individual zoning commissions, historic commissions, and building code officials to make decisions that might have significant external ramifications. Sometimes, it works. In Hartford, for example, we've adopted a [form-based zoning code](#) to protect the character of our historic neighborhoods, and we have protected the environment with renewable energy allowances, waterway buffers, and density bonuses for integrating

green roofs, combined heat and power, and fuel cells.

Most local governments, however, cannot easily change their rules to address our coming challenges.

That's why the conference focused on the role states might play in addressing the climate crisis, as it relates to our many existing buildings. In Connecticut, we have recognized that the state legislature can support, guide, and create a framework for meaningful change across localities. For example, one state law prevents local historic district commissions from rejecting a solar panel application absent what amounts to a compelling reason. In addition, our state environmental protection act protects from unreasonable destruction National Register properties, alongside natural resources.

During the conference, attendees had a range of ideas about the role of our state, often framing the discussion with concerns of equity and affordability. Some of these ideas are contained in a [summary we distributed after the conference](#).



A panel of six state legislators from Connecticut, including the Majority Leader of the House, responds to the discussion. | Credit: Spencer A. Sloan Photography

States provide local governments with enabling authority to act in certain ways. State legislators may choose to enable local governments to enact deconstruction ordinances that require the dismantling and recycling of building materials, like Portland, Oregon, does, or adopt demolition-by-neglect ordinances.

State government has a financial function. Attendees suggested that we ensure the State adequately maintains its own historic sites, put historic preservation funding in a lockbox, and enhance energy efficiency programs, which tend to benefit low-income homeowners.

States have a regulatory function, too. State governments provide rights of legal action, establishes standards for historic preservation projects, and

safeguards our right to clean air, water, and land. Attendees generally agreed that our state environmental protection act—under threat last year—should be strongly protected from erosive changes. Interestingly, many suggested that we codify a “light” version of the Secretary of the Interior Standards and tie such standards to State tax credits or village districts. The environmental groups raised our awareness of a “Green Amendment,” providing a constitutional right to clean air, water, and land.

States have an administrative function. There will always be room for improving how public programs and processes are coordinated to better protect natural and historic resources. In our case, attendees recommended that Connecticut create, for the first time, a State Department of Planning. One of the more interesting ideas was presented by Professor Ryan Rowberry, a speaker who pointed to a British law that allows private parties to force the government to divest public properties through a “right to contest.”

Preservationists everywhere are having similar discussions. At [PastForward, the National Trust for Historic Preservation](#) conference last October, members of the National Trust Advisors heard from representatives from Nevada and Colorado who are planning for wildfires, not sea level rise. There has been some great new work on this from the academic side, too, including from Penn’s and Columbia’s preservation programs.

All of us need to continue to evaluate, reframe, and change our laws at every level, as we push for a more sustainable future for our past.

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