



LIFE SAFETY AND ACCESSIBILITY

Overview

A new use or a substantial rehabilitation of a historic building can result in requirements to meet contemporary standards for both life safety and accessibility to people with disabilities. Requirements are different for commercial and institutional buildings versus residential ones. Often accessibility to a building may need to be altered to accommodate individual residents. Given the foundation of most buildings in the district, accessibility to the entrance by wheelchair is a common problem. Ramp access typically requires a run of over 20 feet. Introducing such a large feature on the exterior of a historic building without destroying or diminishing significant architectural features is clearly a challenge. Likewise, adding an exterior fire stair or fire exit requires careful study of all alternatives.

When planning any life safety or accessibility retrofit to a historic building, solutions should be sought that achieve the life safety and accessibility goals with the least visible impact on the property. Any changes should be as reversible as possible. Electric wheelchair lifts can be good options for achieving wheelchair accessibility to historic buildings. They require less length than ramps and can often be easily screened with landscaping.

Resources:

Preservation Brief 32: Making Historic Properties Accessible

<http://www.nps.gov/tps/how-to-preserve/briefs/32-accessibility.htm>

Note: Historic District Commission approval does not relieve the building owner from meeting requirements of other authorities having jurisdiction. Property owners must receive all applicable permits and approvals.

GUIDELINES FOR LIFE SAFETY AND ACCESSIBILITY

1. Health and safety code and accessibility requirements must be met in ways that do not diminish the historic character features, materials, and details of the building.
2. If possible, fire exits, stairs, landings, and decks must be located on rear or inconspicuous side elevations where they will not be visible from the street.
3. New fire doors shall not be introduced in ways that would diminish the original design of the building or damage historic materials and features. New fire doors must be as compatible as possible with existing doors in proportion, location, size, and detail.
4. When introducing reversible features to assist people with disabilities, diminishment of the original design of the porch or the entrance and damage of historic materials or features must be avoided to every extent possible.
5. If possible, accessibility requirements should be complied with through portable or temporary ramps or lifts, rather than permanent ramps.

