Watchung Plaza has served the neighborhood surrounding the Watchung Avenue Station since 1918 and is integral to the history of Montclair’s growth during the 20th century. In an effort to capitalize on the resources which reflect elements of Montclair’s cultural, social, and architectural history, as well as foster civic pride in the history and architecture of the Township, the Montclair Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) would like to recognize the historic architectural integrity and aesthetic of Watchung Plaza through the designation of a local historic district.

**LOCAL HISTORIC DISTRICT?**

A local historic district is an area recognized for the unique character and identity of its historic buildings. The purpose of a local historic district is to promote and protect local resources, even while the community is changing, and preserve the richness of the past while fostering civic pride in the history and architecture of the community. Change is important to each city’s evolution, as local districts provide social and psychological benefits. A sense of empowerment and confidence develops when community decisions are made through a structured participatory process rather than behind closed doors or without public comment.

Local districts encourage better design. It has been shown through comparative studies that there is a greater sense of relatedness, more innovative use of materials, and greater public appeal within historic districts than in areas without historic designations.

Local districts enhance a community’s business recruitment potential. Companies frequently relocate to communities that offer their workers a higher quality of life, which is greatly enhanced by successful local preservation programs and stable historic districts.

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Local districts protect the investments of owners and residents. Buyers know that the aspects that make a particular area attractive will be protected over a period of time. Real estate agents in many cities use historic district status as a marketing tool to sell properties.

Local districts attract visitors. A historic district that is aesthetically cohesive and well promoted can be a community’s most important attraction. The retention of historic areas as a way to attract tourist dollars makes good economic sense.

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The Watchung Plaza Historic Business District developed around the Watchung Avenue Station of the Erie Railroad during the early twentieth century. Most of the buildings and the two parks that define its center – Watchung Plaza Park and Watchung Park – were erected between 1918 and 1925. This development occurred as a response to citizen outcry over a proposed store and apartment building located on the east side of the railroad station, where Watchung Plaza Park is now located. Residents banded together, forming the Watchung Improvement Association to advocate for attractive development near the station and improvements throughout the Watchung section of Montclair.

Architect Clifford C. Wendehack, an Upper Montclair resident best known for his designs for golf clubhouses, prepared an alternative development plan for Watchung Plaza on behalf of the Watchung Improvement Association. The plans included the parks on either side of the station and the commercial strip on Watchung Plaza, as well as improvements to the train station that were never realized. He designed the building at the southeast corner of Watchung Avenue and Watchung Plaza as a blueprint for the English cottage-style development desired by the Association.

By about 1930, the development of the Watchung Plaza Historic Business District was complete. During its early years, the businesses in the district supplied commuters and local residents with groceries, dry goods, hardware, and a variety of services, including barbers, hairdressers, and laundries. As the twentieth century progressed, the district’s businesses provided more specialty goods and services, as well as a growing number of restaurants, to meet the changing demands of modern society.

The Montclair Historic Preservation Commission will consider the proposed designation of Watchung Plaza as a local landmark district after a period of public outreach and comment, culminating in a hearing on the application. The Commission will then forward its recommendations to the Township Council and Planning Board for action.

For additional information regarding the designation of the Watchung Plaza Historic Business District, please contact:

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