

**TOWN OF GREAT BARRINGTON
SELECTBOARD'S MEETING
MINUTES
MONUMENT MOUNTAIN REGIONAL HIGH SCHOOL
December 16, 2015**

PRESENT:

SELECTBOARD

SEAN STANTON
STEPHEN C. BANNON
DANIEL BAILLY
ED ABRAHAMS
BILL COOKE

TOWN MANAGER, JENNIFER TABAKIN
TOWN PLANNER, CHRIS REMBOLD
TOWN COUNSEL, DAVID DONESKI

1. CALL TO ORDER:

Mr. Stanton called the meeting to order at 7 p.m. On a motion by Mr. Bannon, seconded by Mr. Bailly and voted unanimously by the Selectboard, the chairman reopened the public hearing on the application of 79 Bridge Street Realty, LLC, 247 Stockbridge Road, Great Barrington, for a hotel use in a B3 zone, more than 45 hotel rooms, redevelopment in excess of 20,000 square feet in the B3 zone, work in the Floodplain Overlay District, and work in the Water Quality Protection Overlay District Zone II, in accordance with Sections 3.1.4, C(8), 7.10.2, 9.4.9, 9.1, and 9.2.12, respectively, and Section 10.4 of the Great Barrington Zoning Bylaw, at 79 Bridge Street, Great Barrington. The hearing had convened Nov. 8, 2015, and was continued to this date.

Mr. Stanton said the Board of Health, Historic Commission, Conservation Commission and Design Review Committee had submitted reports but the Conservation Commission and Planning Board were still in review. He said the application meets the criteria that its benefits are greater than its impact. The permits will need four positive votes of the members. He said written comments may be submitted on paper to the Town Clerk's office before the next hearing date.

2. OVERVIEW OF SEARLES HIGH SCHOOL SITE

Mr. Rembold provided this background information:

The purpose of this overview is to give a brief history of the ownership status of the site and the zoning of the site.

The Searles School building opened in 1898, and the school use continued at the site for over a century, with the school district vacating the building in 2005. When the Bryant school building (opened in 1889) the site was a single property, or campus, totaling just over three acres.

Neither Searles nor Bryant are designated buildings in a Local Historic District, or in the State or National Register of Historic Places. They are not protected structures.

Since 2005, the Searles building has been vacant. The gymnasium was utilized as a polling place until about 2010 when the new Fire Station opened. A portion of the Searles Annex was leased as office/manufacturing space until 2009.

Prior to the schools closing in 2005 and relocating to Monument Valley, the Selectboard and many members of the public put a great deal of effort, in public meetings, to studying the site and trying to determine the best use of the site. The Board appointed, twice, school re-use task forces to study reuse options with the community and make recommendations to the Board. The original task force looked at all three schools (including the Housatonic School), and it prompted the Board to seek additional information about Searles and Bryant in particular. This led to the

second task force, which produced an extensive report with recommendations that included conducting a feasibility analysis. It even recommended to the Board that the Town retain ownership of the site. The Board did not adopt this point, and voted to put the entire property up for sale. These task force reports are public documents.

Thereafter, after extensive meetings and many drafts, an RFP was developed by the Board. In 2007, a market study was completed for the Town in order to inform the Town's decision making on disposition of the entire campus. Town Meeting authorized the Selectboard to sell the site, and the Town first issued an RFP for the entire site in November 2007. Three proposals were received, and an evaluation committee was formed. That Committee met with proposers and vetted proposals. It determined two of the three met the evaluation criteria and sent them to the Board for their consideration. The Board voted to sell the site to one of these, but ultimately the sale was not finalized. The Town issued a second RFP in May 2009, and a sale to Riverschool Redevelopment LLC was finalized in September 2010.

As part of the sale to Riverschool, the site was subdivided and the Bryant School building was sold by Riverschool to ERH Bryant, for Iredale Mineral Cosmetics (IMC) to renovate for its world headquarters. The Bryant renovation received its special permits in 2010 and the project opened last year.

After the principal owner of the Searles site, Riverschool, did not fulfill its mortgage obligations to the Town, IMC as guarantor assumed the controlling interest of the Riverschool entity. The mortgage was paid in full in 2014, and since then the Town has had no financial interest in the site.

Since 2010 the Searles and Bryant sites have been separate parcels, and privately owned. Again, the Town does not own either site. Tonight's applicant has the option to purchase the Searles site from Riverschool. A great deal of effort over the course of many years and meetings was expended by Town officials and volunteers to try to arrive at a preferred development scenario. Those scenarios did not come to fruition.

In terms of the site's zoning and development potential, the Zoning Bylaw was revised in 2007 to create the B-3 zone to promote mixed-use development at this site, and, across the river, at the former New England Log Homes and Dolby Florist sites.

These zoning provisions arose in part from the Searles Bryant School Re-Use Task Force reports, which encouraged mixed use redevelopment in this area of Town. The reports also recommended that redevelopment at any of these sites be done with consideration of redevelopment scenarios at the other sites, and that development take place in close coordination with the adjacent Housatonic River Walk, Memorial Field, connections to downtown, and pedestrian and vehicular improvements to Bridge Street.

The B-3 zone also allows a variety of uses by right including:

- Single- or two-family residential dwelling
- Banks or financial institutions
- Garden centers and greenhouses
- Professional offices
- Retail use less than or equal to 20,000 square feet

In 2014, the Planning Board proposed, and Town Meeting approved, a revision to the hotel/motel room limit in the Zoning Bylaw to allow for more than 45 rooms. As stated by the Planning Board, "Since a room limit could make a historic redevelopment or reuse projects economically infeasible, this amendment could remedy that issue and could encourage the redevelopment or reuse of existing historic structures, a goal of the Master Plan."

While the bylaw amendment was not aimed at the Searles school site in particular, it did allow for buildings not on the State or National register or in a Local Historic District to qualify for the room limit exemption if the Town's Historical Commission designated the structure as significant to the Town. The Historical Commission designated the Searles property as such in June 2015. The Historical Commission provided detailed recommendations as to which architectural

features of the building define its character and should be preserved. The Historical Commission's letter was included in the Application pending before the Selectboard tonight.

Town Counsel has provided an opinion about how the Selectboard should interpret this important section of the Zoning Bylaw.

3. TOWN COUNSEL'S LETTER

The board has in hand a Nov. 9, 2015, letter from Town Counsel Doneski in which he gives his opinion on the appropriate interpretation of Zoning Bylaw Section 7.10.2. His comments, as excerpted by the application during a presentation, were:

- In my opinion, the appropriate interpretation of section 7.10.2 is that in order for a project to be eligible for the room limit exemption, at least some portion of the historic structure on which the exemption is based must be preserved as part of the project.”

- It is my opinion that the Selectboard, as the special permit granting authority for this application, may reasonably determine the extent of preservation required for compliance with the purposes of the Zoning By-law.”

- “...the question becomes ... how will the redevelopment promote or secure the historic, cultural or architectural significance of the structure.”

- ... in making that determination the Selectboard, as the special permit granting authority, has a measure of discretion.”

4. APPLICANT'S PRESENTATION

Attorney Kathleen M. McCormick of McCormick, Murtagh & Marcus made a PowerPoint presentation, the slides collected in a spiral-bound book which was distributed to board members. She described the proposal for a 95-room upscale hotel with 60-seat restaurant and corporate meeting space on a 3.1-acre site. Five separate special permits are required: 3.1.4(c)(8), establish a hotel; 9.4.9, redevelop in excess of 20,000 square feet; 9.1 Flood Plain Overlay District; 9.2.12, Water Quality Protection Overlay – Zone II; and waiver of 45-room limit under 7.10.2. Applicant also requests a waiver of requirement for three loading spaces, to allow a single loading space.

Chrystal Mahida of 79 Bridge Street Realty said she and her husband, Vijay Mahida, started with the Monument Mountain Motel in Great Barrington, then built the Comfort Inn. The new hotel, to be called The Barrington, will generate \$450,000 in real estate and lodging taxes a year and will generate downtown foot traffic and provide career opportunities. Marketing will be aimed at New York metro residents.

Vijay Mahida of 79 Bridge Street Realty said he and his wife have listened to remarks made about an earlier version of the hotel, which included razing the existing school building. He said he understands people want the new building to look much like the old building. He said this is a \$25 million project.

Ms. McCormick handed Selectboard members copies of a letter from Smith, Watson accountants saying town revenues from the hotel could be \$575,000 a year. She also handed out a binder containing 250 supportive letters from residents and business owners.

James M. Scalise II of S.K. Design Group reviewed engineering details of the project. He said the hotel will be outside the floodplain. He said the requirement is 20 percent of the project be green space; as designed, 22 percent is. He said the red oak tree near Bridge Street will be preserved and be centerpiece of a mini park. On behalf of Jon Dietrich of Fuss & O'Neill, he said a traffic study shows minimal impact on traffic flow on Bridge Street and the Main Street traffic light, with 33 vehicle trips generated in peak hours. It will mean a few seconds longer wait at the light, he said. He said 95 parking spaces are required, one per room. It is anticipated that guests at the hotel will be customers at the restaurant and participants in conferences. Another 40 spaces behind Wheeler & Taylor will be secured for overflow valet parking as needed. Only one loading space/trash container site is needed, so a waiver is sought. Landscape will resemble what has been done at the former Bryant School, now headquarters for Iredale Mineral Cosmetics.

Rolf K. Biggers, BMA Architectural Group, said Henry Vaughn's original design for Searles High School will be maintained. Specifically, the center of three Palladian blocks will be retained, front and back, and new blocks with wider wings will be built. A porch will run the length of the Bridge Street side. He said the dolomite base will be kept, with new stone blocks secured if necessary. Brick and quoins will be reused. The main entry will go front to back. A fitness center and swimming pool will be in the modified annex. The gym will be enlarged and an upper floor built. Some wooden floors, including the one from the gym, will be reused, as will be some doors, clocks and the chemical lab shower. A consultant will be hired to document the building for town records.

David Carpenter of 79 Bridge Street Realty said a Searles Conference Center in the large meeting space will continue the building's education tradition. He said it will be a community gathering place. He said there will be display cases for Searles and town history. He said William Caligari will design the interior. He said a small library will be dedicated to the history of Searles, Riverwalk and the Housatonic River.

J. Gavin Cockfield of Davis, Malm & D'Agostine said he agreed with Town Counsel Doneski's letter regarding the preservation of a historic structure.

Ms. McCormick said the proposal meets the Master Plan vision. She said it will create 30 full-time equivalent jobs after construction and will diversify the tax base.

5. SELECTBOARD COMMENTS

Selectman Bailly asked why 95 rooms. Mr. Mahida said he originally wanted 110, but was discouraged by Ms. Iredale. Robert Montgomery of Iredale Mineral Cosmetics said they generally approve of the plan.

6. PUBLIC COMMENTS

Mark Fasteau, 77 Seekonk Road said the hotel market in Great Barrington is not an upscale one that low-end chain hotels do well. He said higher-spending guests won't materialize and the Selectboard should ask for a full set of financial projections and have them vetted by specialists. He said the hotel will not compete with Wheatleigh or Blantyre. He said the average room rate in June was \$145 a night, \$158 in July. He said occupancy falls in the 66 to 68 percent range. He said the numbers do not support the proposed hotel.

Tony Blair, 9 Lake Ave., said the second School Reuse Task Force suggested mixed use, not a hotel. He said the town has sold the old school and should no longer think it has an ownership interest. He said the applicant needs to address the requirements of the special permit. He said the building is deteriorating and this is the best possible reuse.

Gary Happ, 154 Castle St., said his Crissey Farms would have more business if more people could find a place to stay in town during busy months. He said many people coming to town are resorting to AirBnB, from which the town sees no revenue. He said Mr. Mahida is a professional hotel man. He said all the money that comes into town comes from tourists. He said the Selectboard should approve the plan.

Anne Fredericks, 77 Seekonk Cross Road, said to approve the plan would circumvent the will of the people who last year at town meeting voted the 45-room cap. She said the Mahidas would have a monopoly, and would bow to demands of the hotel chains. She gave a long list of small businesses in town that would not benefit from the construction or operation of the hotel. She said The Barrington would take revenues away from other hotels and bed and breakfasts and ruin the character of Great Barrington.

Scott Morias, 30 Elm Court, said the public was being hypnotized by the publicity for the hotel. To suggest guests would go to this hotel instead of Blantyre misreads the type of guest who goes to Blantyre. Upscale guests, he suggested, would not want to stay at a 95-room hotel and look out the window at a ballfield. He said rates will be reduced to fill rooms. He said bus tours will be

booked. He said there will be no positive outcome to the town, quality of life will diminish. He said the town needs to develop alternatives to tourism. He said this will not be a meeting place for townspeople.

Michele Miller, who has a business at 10 Crissey Road, said Pittsfield has torn down historic buildings and come to regret it, as will Great Barrington if this project is approved. She wondered if the Mahidas would come back asking for more rooms. She said the projected tax revenues are not relevant. She said there are not enough parking spaces. She said independent businesses in town oppose the plan.

Valerie Locher, 231 North Plain Road, commended the presentation but said it is not in character with the town. An upscale hotel, she said, is not a good transition to a residential neighborhood. She said it is too large and does not preserve enough of the building. She said the town will no longer be able to use parking spaces along Riverwalk.

Robert Waller, 225 State Road, said he remembered the debate over the Triplex and parking 20 years ago. He said the hotel would generate jobs and help keep our children in town after they finish their educations. He asked who else would be willing to put so much money into a white elephant.

Malcolm Fick, 1 Maplewood Ave., said he appreciated the applicant was willing to spend \$25 million, but the building should be kept to 45 rooms. He said the town has been “hypnotized” over the word “preserve.” He said the building will go from three-story to four-story. He said the Selectboard should respect the town meeting vote of 2014. He urged a vote for historic preservation.

Gabrielle Senza, School Street, said there are only 10 employee parking spaces indicated. She said other businesses use the spaces now. She asked how often trash containers would be removed, where the valet parking spaces were and whether “limestone finish” meant real or fake façade.

Elizabeth Orenstein, 116 West Ave., said she came back to Great Barrington to live because she loves the town and the river front and “Searles was integral to my life.” She rued the proposed 20-foot roadway next to RiverWalk as taking away from its mission. The site deserves more than a high-traffic hotel, she said.

David Lazan, 8 Cornwall Dr., said he has seen photos of grand town buildings that are now gone, buildings that became too expensive to maintain. Searles Middle School after a while could no longer achieve its educational mission and became an eyesore. He said it will be a long time before a better plan comes along.

Jennifer Clark, 10 Oak St., commended the professionalism of the application but said the Selectboard has to hold the applicant to the will of the people. She asked if the center portion of the old building would be preserved or razed and rebuilt; where the 22 percent of the site that would be kept green was, precisely; why a parking study was done in May and not July or August; how such a big hotel was expected to convey a lively rural experience; and what the owners’ relationship was, is or will be with the Hilton chain.

Sharon Gregory, 32 Hollenbeck Ave., said the Village Center Overlay District was intended to maintain small-scale businesses and a large-scale hotel would be a change of direction. She said the parking plan would compound congestion. She said St. James Square will and the Triplex already does make use of all available surrounding spaces at peak times. She said hotels don’t drive local business. She said profits often go to national owners. She said Great Barrington has a thriving restaurant business, but can’t compete with Lenox on tourist attractions such as Tanglewood, Chesterwood or The Mount. She said the global trend is to AirBnB.

Maya Conty, 219 North Plain Road, said the large hotel has cultural implications. It will do business with visiting strangers, hold conferences for visiting strangers. She said it will divide the community. It will focus on visitors rather than be a real gathering place for townspeople. She said it won’t help those seeking good jobs and affordable rents.

Leigh Davis, 9 Sumner St., said this is a derelict property across from Railroad Street Youth Project, which is striving to work with teens to overcome teen issues. She said the town should take the initiative and help create jobs and develop the town's economy. If this project is passed up, how long before another viable option comes along, she asked. She said an upscale hotel can benefit the town.

Jeremiah Pollard, a lawyer from Lee, said he represented a group of Great Barrington citizens. Chairman Stanton gave him permission to speak, and he said the applicant's original plan was to destroy the Searles building and that hasn't greatly changed. He asked what percentage of the old building would be retained, and would it be any more than a façade. He said there really will be little reuse.

Paul Ivory, 54 Grove St., said the Historic Commission was sensitive to the issues of preservation and adaptive reuse. He said the commission determined the building was a historical one in its entirety. He disagreed with the architect that the proposal meets the intent of the Historic Commission. He said tangible memories couldn't be kept in a display case. He said the new structure wouldn't qualify to be nominated for the National Register.

Mark Cohen, 10 Warren Ave., said tax revenues are important, but town meeting voters set a 45-room limit except for historic preservation. The changes proposed don't meet the criteria. He said town meeting is a last remnant of pure democracy and should be needed.

Beth Carlson, who lives in Stockbridge but works in Great Barrington, said there could be an overload of hotel rooms if this project is built. She wondered about the Mahidas connections with the Hilton chain, and what role Hilton might play in the design.

Steve McAllister, 3 Warren Ave., said contrary to what others have said, he hasn't seen signs of vandalism at the old school. He said the proposal is not historic preservation; keeping one section of the old building and constructing new wings around it is not historic preservation.

Jonathan Weiner, 175 North Plain Road, commended the Mahidas for their previous work and said The Barrington will absolutely pay taxes and employ people.

Bobby Houston, 27 Humphrey St., said it's not the building's fault it has been derelict for 10 years. He said others will want to do something with it.

Karen Smith, 5 Monument Valley Road, said resistance to change causes pain. She said there's a difference between Searles and St. James. She said architects should tell the town what percentage of an old building needs to be retained for it to be considered preservation. She said the Mahidas are quality individuals and character shouldn't come into the discussion. She said they have bank backing.

Kosh Cami, a sophomore at Monument Mountain Regional High School, said the Mahidas' goal is to improve Great Barrington. He said the added tax revenue will enable the school district to repair the leaky roof at MMRHS.

7. VOTE TO CONTINUE HEARING

Discussion ended at 10:15 p.m. On a motion by Mr. Bannon, seconded by Mr. Bailly and approved by all, the hearing was continued to Jan. 20, 2016, at 7 p.m. at Monument Mountain Regional High School.

8. ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting adjourned at 10:16 p.m. on a motion by Mr. Bannon, seconded by Mr. Bailly and voted without dissent.



Bernard A. Drew
Recording Secretary