

Minutes
Meeting of Great Barrington Historical Commission
December 9, 2015
Selectboard Meeting Room
Town Hall
334 Main St.
Great Barrington, MA 01230

ATTENDING:

- *Members:* Marilyn Bisiewicz, Malcolm Fick, Don Howe, Paul Ivory, Gary Leveille, David Rutstein

MINUTES OF NOVEMBER 16, 2015

- Paul has not finished the minutes which will be deferred to the next meeting.

LETTER TO SELECTBOARD RE: SEARLES HIGH SCHOOL PROJECT

- The membership reviewed the draft letter regarding the Commission's support of the preservation of the entire historic structure.
 - Don. felt that the Annex reflects the architecture of its 1960's period of construction and is a part of the history of the complex.
 - Don also disagreed with Bob Silman's assessment of the structure. The multi-level configuration of the interior poses challenges for a working hotel. Malcolm disagreed, stating it is not as difficult a problem as many claim. The Historical Commission has always focused its concern on the exterior appearance. Don observed that to reconfigure the interior would require a serious commitment to costs and operation.
 - Motion: On a motion by Malcolm and seconded by Marilyn, the Commission unanimously approved the letter and its submission to the Selectboard.

DEMOLITION DELAY BYLAW PROPOSAL

- Paul thanked Malcolm for agreeing to organize and coordinate the bylaw initiative.
- Drawing from "Proposed Demolition Delay Bylaw - Great Barrington," an information sheet he prepared to brief the Commission and others, Malcolm summarized the project.
 - The Commonwealth provide two means to protect historic buildings: Local Historic Districts and Demolition Delay Bylaws.
 - 130 towns in the state have adopted this bylaw.
 - The main purpose is to provide a cooling-off period when the owner of a historically and/or architecturally significant building requests a demolition permit.
 - The bylaw would be triggered on an application for a demolition permit on any building 50 years or more old. The Building Inspector forwards the request to the Historical Commission which has 15 days to conduct a review to determine if the structure is sufficiently significant to warrant institution of a delay. This decision is based upon such criteria as National Register listing or eligibility status, or the results of research conducted by the Commission. If this is affirmative the Commission has 30 days to conduct a public hearing. Following the hearing the Commission has 21 days to issue a written report to the Building Inspector. If it's determined to be a "preferably preserved" building, the Building Inspector may not issue any permits for demolition or other changes to the building for a period of 12 months unless notified of approval by the Historical Commission. During the waiting period the Commission works with the owner, developer or other interested parties to find an alternative use that would make demolition unnecessary. It can also cancel the delay which would authorize the Building Inspector to issue the permit
 - In making its determination, the Commission could request the opinion of experts, such as a structural engineer, to judge if the building is sufficiently structurally sound to save..
 - The procedure for adopting the bylaw is by approval by the Selectboard and then a vote at the town meeting.
 - The state has written a bylaw template that will be adapted to our local situation and conditions.
 - The bylaw includes a process for emergency demolition if the building is determined to be unsafe or dangerous.
 - If there are any unauthorized alterations to the building during the waiting period the bylaw would impose penalty payments of \$300/day until the changes are restored.

➤ Loopholes:

- ✓ The delay can't be instituted for permits to demolish just a part of the building.
- ✓ There is no definition of what a "saved" building is. The spirit and intent of the law is for the owner to succeed with his/her plans and to preserve the building. In working out a solution the Commission needs to be reasonable and embrace a "give and take" attitude.
- Gary stated that there's a history in the town about preservation impositions and feared a pushback. He felt that 12 months was too long a waiting period and this issue alone could result in many "no" votes. Marilyn agreed with Gary and recommended the six month duration. Malcolm, with Don's agreement, responded that the earlier bylaws with a six month period found that it was too short a time to complete the work. Now, towns are employing the 12 month timetable. The 12 month duration may be sufficient time to incorporate the building into a Local Historic District which would override demolition delay as a means of protection. Malcolm felt that if there is strong pushback to the 12 month period, it could be changed to six months. A universal complaint for this and most preservation measures is: "You can't tell me what to do with my property."
- Although the climate in town seems to favor this sort of protection, reinforcement with public education is an important part of this campaign: the Commission has to make clear that preservation of historic buildings is fundamental to protecting the town's economy and the core of its identity. When we are blessed with these resources, stewardship is a basic civic responsibility.
- Ed Abrahams asked what else can the town do? The owner can wait it out or work with the Commission to find a solution.
- Next Steps:
 - ✓ Historical Commission briefs the Selectboard, Planning Board and Historic District Commission
 - ✓ Prepare an informational handout
 - ✓ Hold a public hearing
- Motion:
 - A motion by Paul, and seconded by Don, to authorize Malcolm to write a letter to the Selectboard requesting they consider adoption of a Demolition Delay Bylaw and that the measure be placed on the 2016 Town Meeting warrant, was passed unanimously.
 - Malcolm will talk to the Town Manager about the proper procedure for this action. He will also share any drafts with Paul before sending them.
 - Ed Abrahams believed that the Selectboard's approval wasn't necessary.

OTHER BUSINESS

- Motion on Searles High School Building Media Release: A motion by Gary, and seconded by Malcolm, to approve of and authorize distribution of the media release, "Notes on Significance and Preservation of Searles High School (1898). Summary of Building's Significance," with the addition of the date of December 9, 2015, passed unanimously.
- Motion Authorizing Chairman to Make Statements about Searles High School Building on Behalf of Commission: A motion by Malcolm, and seconded by Gary, to empower Paul, as Chairman, to make communications about Searles High School, as he deems necessary, to further the Commission's opposition to the demolition of the Searles Building, but for issues he feels need discussion, to wait until the next Commission meeting, passed unanimously.
- Indian Cairns on Brush Hill: Gary reported that on an expedition with members of the Sheffield Historical Society, a dozen stone cairns were discovered on Brush Hill, along the Sheffield-Great Barrington town line. Gary and others believe they are Native American artifacts. ..

NEXT MEETING DATE

- Monday, January 11, 2016, 7:00 pm at a site to be determined.

ADJOURN

- Motion made, seconded and passed unanimously.

