

Minutes
Meeting of Great Barrington Historical Commission
February 9, 2015
Meeting Room
Great Barrington Fire Station
Great Barrington, MA 01230

ATTENDING:

- *Members:* Marilyn Bisiewicz, Malcolm Fick, Paul Ivory, Gary Leveille, Bill Nappo, David Rutstein

MINUTES OF DECEMBER 13, 2014

- On a motion by Malcolm and second by Marilyn, the December 13, 2014 minutes were approved unanimously.

REVIEW OF DRAFT "*REVIEW FORM FOR HISTORICAL SITE APPLICATION. ZONING BYLAW 7.10.2 ROOM LIMITS*"

- *Background and Context:* Paul summarized the genesis and rationale that prompted the introduction of this bylaw by the Planning Board. Great Barrington is blessed with an impressive roster of older and historic buildings. The town's Master Plan recognized this asset and made the sensitive preservation and use of our older structures an important goal.

Last year the Planning Board drafted a zoning bylaw that would allow for a variance that would increase the number of allowable rooms in a hotel and motel that a developer wants to include in an adaptive reuse of an old building. The proviso was that it had to be officially "historic." The historic significance can be certified if the building is on the National Register of Historic Places or if the Great Barrington Historical Commission judges it to be historic.

This bylaw is clearly a win-win proposition. An old, historic building can be sensitively preserved and it can contribute to our economy and to the aesthetic that gives Great Barrington its identity.

A proposed project to adaptively reuse Searles High School by developer Vijay Mahida, Great Barrington, came forward as an applicant concurrently with the unfolding of the bylaw.

- *Draft Forms:* Implicitly, the Historical Commission was charged with devising a process of how a developer applies for, and how the HC responds to, historic designation. The Commission designed two models of a form that a developer would complete to document the historical significance of the building he/she seeks to adaptively reuse as a hostelry for submission to the HC.
 - The first version, "Draft 2," is based upon the form the Commission designed for the Community Preservation Act applicants in the Historic Resources category to determine if the site is historically, culturally or architecturally significant to Great Barrington. In response to the Commission's self-critique that many of the questions were redundant, many sections have been deleted (indicated by the strikethroughs in the draft).
 - The second version, "Draft Version 2," suggested by Bill Nappo, is based upon "Form B," which a town completes for each building in an architectural survey. This calls for all essential information required on which a decision is based. An "Integrity of

Property" section was added to the draft. The advantage is having a form essentially prepared that will need to be completed in the future anyway.

- *Procedure:* the basic steps in the process are:
 1. Developer requests form from GBHC
 2. Developer completes and submits form
 3. GBHC judges the historicity of the building and responds in a letter with any recommendations it may think pertinent to the preservation of the building's history and architecture.
 4. Developer uses an affirmative judgment to apply for an increase in the number of rooms
 5. Developer presents plans to the Selectboard for a permit to build

The Historical Commission has no authority to accept or deny or amend a project. This rests with the Selectboard. The Commission can only rule on the historical significance of a building and make recommendations about the preservation of the architecture. The Commission will comment on the parts of project plans submitted to the Selectboard that it determines to be sensitive and insensitive treatment of the building's architecture.

- *Discussion:*
 - The application format must be simple, uniform and consistent for each applicant. The HC shouldn't make up rules on an *ad hoc* basis.
 - The application needs to require attachment of a copy of the existing Architectural Survey form for the building.
 - Malcolm suggested that some buildings are universally known to be historic and that all of the work to complete and submit a form needn't be required. Paul responded that the submission is necessary. The scholarly research adds to our knowledge of the building and serves as a public record of the basis for our decision. Using "common knowledge" as a basis is too vague and wouldn't be a substantial reason, especially if any person or agency challenged the Commission's decision.
 - In the case of properties that are comprised of older and newer structures, the HC, in its ruling, must cite what is historic and what isn't.
 - The Commission agreed with the request of Kate McCormick, attorney for Vijay Mahida, to include the phrase, "making a written determination" and deleting "project" and replacing with "architecture of the building" in item 5 of Procedures.
- *Vote:* On a motion by Malcolm and second by Bill the first version, "Draft 2" with amendments and attachment were approved unanimously by the Commission. Paul will prepare a new draft, circulate to the members for final review and distribute to the Searles High School attorney.

METHODIST PARSONAGE

- Kate McCormick, whose firm is representing the developer of the Methodist Church property, stated that they are close to filing a special permit on the church.
- The Historical Commission needs to check the condition of the buildings, document the site with photographs and decide if a letter needs to be sent to either the Selectboard and/or the developer about the intent to raze the parsonage.

COLLECTIONS

- *New Computer and Software:* Gary and Malcolm reported that the Commission has purchased a new HP laptop with sufficient power to operate the software used in managing the collection and that it is "up and running." They gratefully acknowledged the assistance of the Town Hall, especially Chris Rembold's secretary. Paul will track down the invoice with her.
- *Preservation Needs Assessment:* Gary had brought to the Commission's attention the Egremont Historical Commission's contract with the Northeast Document Conservation Center to complete a "preservation needs assessment." The assessment documents and prioritizes preservation goals and objectives for both a museum's collections and the building that houses them. Paul has had experience in undertaking several of these programs and asserted that they become an invaluable tool in short and long range planning, budgeting and fund raising (especially through grants).
 - Clearly, the town museum (and Historical Society) collection would benefit from an assessment. However, because the collection is in "temporary" quarters on the second floor of the Ramsdell Library, the question is, should the Commission invest in the effort, time and funds to review spaces that eventually may not be available? Gary stated that the Community Preservation Committee has asked the Historical Society if all their collections will be moved to the Ramsdell. This issue relates to the present and future disposition of the collections and that space.
 - Gary stated that because of the perceptibly temporary use of the space, the HC shouldn't invest in a wholesale assessment, rather address individual challenges, such as stabilizing the temperature and relative humidity.
 - Malcolm suggested applying for a CPA grant for a needs assessment. Paul replied that our priority for seeking that funding is for updating the architectural survey. Another option is that the CPA allows more than one application from a single organization.

RAMSDELL LIBRARY UPDATE: PROGRAM, PLANNING, BUDGET FOR SECOND FLOOR OPERATIONS

- *Arthur Dutil Meeting:* Museum facility and security consultant, Arthur Dutil, Stockbridge, MA, met with Paul on January 23 to review the space and make security recommendations. Some of the key suggestions included:
 - The forthcoming issuance of keys to the HC needs to be accompanied with instruction in operation of the key pad security alarm code for entry into the first floor hallway and second floor.
 - Because no hard-wired fire detection/alarm system is in the building, install smoke and/or rate-of-rise fire detection monitors and connect them to a flashing light in the front window to alert neighbors, police and passers-by of problem.
 - Install UV film on all windows
 - Purchase digital hygrothermograph to document temperature and relative humidity in all seasons to provide the data that will help make informed decisions about the type of environmental controls we would need.
- *Space Planning:* A plan needs to be prepared that expresses the most efficient organization of the space to accommodate mission requirements. Any plan needs to respect the historic preciousness of the second floor. The membership agreed that changes in room arrangements should be done in increments and at least revisited after a year.

FY16 ANNUAL WORK PROGRAM AND BUDGET

- Paul distributed a copy of the goals and budget submitted to the town for FY16. Salient priorities included:
 - Documentation of sub-surface man-made features and recovery of artifacts for Main St reconstruction project
 - Maintain Archivist position to continue management and care of collection
 - Continue upgrade of Ramsdell space
 - Pending Town Meeting approval, conserve Newsboy statue and repair fountain
 - Complete Historic Marker guidelines
 - Plan for update of National Register historic resource survey.
 - Continue planning for demolition delay bylaw and Certified Local Government designation.

CERTIFIED LOCAL GOVERNMENT

- In Don's absence, discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

ENDANGERED PROPERTIES PROGRAM

- Paul cited Preservation Massachusetts's "Most Endangered Historic Resources Program," an advocacy and education program to identify and find preservation solutions to properties that are threatened. He recommended the GBHC at some point in the future consider this initiative as a means to achieve our goal of heightening the awareness of the beauty, utility and plight of the town's historic resources.

JOINT MEETING WITH HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION

- In absence of Don, Chair of the GBHDC, discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

HOUSATONIC SCHOOL

- Because of the lengthy, arduous and exacting nature of the Commission's project to research the site to complete Form B, Paul recommended to the Town Manager that the town hire a consultant architectural historian to complete the work. He prepared a draft letter of agreement for the Town Manager's review. To date, he has not received a response.

FIRST RESISTANCE OBELISK

- In Don's absence, discussion was tabled until the next meeting.

OTHER BUSINESS

- *Community Preservation Committee*: Bill reported that at the past two meetings the CP Committee has been reviewing all applications. These include the Newsboy conservation project, the Wheeler House, Town Hall repairs and the Mason Library. The Wetherbee vault was not approved.

NEXT MEETING: Monday, April 6, 7:00pm

ADJOURN

- Motion made, seconded and passed unanimously.