

Stratham Heritage Commission
Minutes of the Meeting of April 10, 2013

The meeting convened at 7 PM

Present: Rebecca Mitchell, Nathan Merrill, Nancy Hansen

Guests: Lincoln Daley, Town Planner; Mike Houghton, Planning Board, Economic Development Committee

The chair asked Nancy Hansen to be a voting member in Janet Johnson's absence.

Minutes approved: December; January; February (with the addition that the chair asked Janet Johnson to be a voting member until Nate's arrival at that meeting)

Discussion with Lincoln Daley and Mike Houghton:

Role of the Heritage Commission: The meeting opened with a discussion of the Heritage Commission's powers and duties as reflected in the warrant article establishing Stratham's commission; the Master Plan (notably the Historic Resources chapter); the NH Preservation Alliance's Preserving Community Character handbook; and in state statutes. Houghton said that he doubted that current members of the Planning Board were familiar with this information. Mitchell noted the similarity between the roles of the Heritage and Conservation Commissions, while observing that the Heritage Commission is infrequently asked to exercise its advisory capacity or is called upon so late in an ongoing process that its effectiveness is reduced. Merrill added that timely, proactive communication would be more productive, avoiding situations whereby volunteer committees are placed in the awkward position of having to weigh in when decisions have already been made or opinions solidified. He also noted that it is important for all representatives of the town (staff members as well as board/committee members) to communicate in a coordinated manner when complex issues arise such as the Emery's Lane rezoning proposal of last winter.

Improved communication: There was general agreement with Daley's statement that better communication is needed so that the Planning Board and the Heritage Commission are aware of each other's activities. Circulation of meeting agendas and minutes could help to correct that. There was also agreement that the Heritage Commission should be involved in Site Plan Review where appropriate. Speaking from their experience on the Gateway Committee, Mitchell and Merrill said that it is important for members of the Planning Board to actually visit sites under consideration to get a full understanding of the site and its surrounding context. Houghton noted that the goals section of the Historical Master Plan recommended that the Planning Board convene a meeting of town boards, commissions and committees each year. He expressed support for this idea, and those present agreed that an appropriate time to meet would be late March, following Town Meeting. It was further agreed that this year a June meeting would be desirable. Mitchell added (with agreement from others) that the goal should be a round-table work session format, rather than past events when the Planning Board sat up front in a row with town committees in the audience, addressing only the Planning Board, rather than each other in a more open dialog.

Historic resources awareness: Mitchell noted that unlike natural resources that have in many cases been identified and mapped by the state or county, the identification of historic resources has been less organized. The map and list of resources prepared for the Master Plan in 2008 is a start, but Merrill stressed the importance of identifying non-built sites or areas of historic significance. Some possible examples discussed include the 270-acre Stuart Farm's eligibility for the National Historic Register, the River Road and Emery's Lane neighborhoods, Winnicutt mills site, and cemeteries. Daley suggested working with the existing historic resources map to add, and graphically display, historic resources of that nature. The commission will work with him to create a map with a quickly observable display of historically significant sites and neighborhoods.

Town Center and Portsmouth Avenue: Merrill observed that under the existing zoning uses are allowed which would be incompatible with the historic character of the Town Center and asked whether a change in zoning is contemplated. Daley said that work on that zoning has begun, using the "form based code" approach applied to the Gateway District. Mitchell said that at some point the zoning of Portsmouth Avenue east of the Town Center to the Greenland town line will have to be addressed. Merrill noted that several past attempts failed, but Mitchell noted that past efforts had not offered sufficient protection of

historic resources or rigorous design guidelines, and that with Daley's expertise a more comprehensive proposal could be created that would be palatable to voters. Merrill noted that "form based code" would be well suited for use in this corridor as well, given the prescriptive nature that would be preferred for the many historic properties present and the desirability of flexibility in allowed uses.

Economic Development: Mitchell noted that historic resources have economic value to the town and that the Heritage Commission is interested in exploring ways to preserve historic resources and community character that are compatible with and contribute to economic development. All present agreed that greater economic vitality in the Town Center and Portsmouth Ave. corridor would help to revitalize and preserve historic structures. Adaptive re-use while respecting the original structures and features is more desirable than losing old homes due to benign neglect or disuse. Houghton said that the Economic Development Committee had discussed inviting Alex Ray to talk with them based on his experience with preservation and revitalization in challenging areas, such as those lacking standard infrastructure. Mitchell offered to try to contact Ray as a follow up to his presentation at a recent preservation conference.

Houghton and Daley departed

Old Business:

Minutes approved as noted above

Finances: Mitchell will organize recent income from sales of postcards, books, and DVDs as well as receipts from expenditures. She will give them to Hansen who will then meet with Merrill to pass along the finance and budget records. Merrill will also meet with town bookkeeper Valerie Kemp.

Regional Heritage Commissions meeting: Mitchell has received registration forms for the May 4 meeting. Hansen said she is unable to attend. Merrill would like to attend but can only do so if rain halts his work. It was agreed that Mitchell will register him and that the \$7 charge for lunch for those members attending will be covered from our budget for conferences and training. Registration is due by April 22.

Demolition Review: Mitchell reported that she is meeting on Friday with Terry Barnes and Tracey Cutler to clarify procedures for handling demolition applications and coordination between their office and the Demolition Review Committee.

New Business:

Social Media: Mitchell reported that speakers at the recent NH Preservation Alliance conference had stressed the importance of using social media as a communication tool. There was general agreement that this is an idea worthy of consideration, but that the commission should not jump into this without a good plan for following through on a consistent and regular basis. Hansen and Merrill both expressed concern for the time it would take to keep the page current and fresh. However, Merrill added that it could be a valuable tool for reaching a wider audience and for allowing interested citizens to be more aware of Heritage Commission activities. Mitchell said that she had seen a Facebook page called Sally Stratham, but neither she nor anyone else present knew anything about it – whether it is a private site with Stratham news or a town-sanctioned project. This remains a topic for further thought and discussion.

Meeting adjourned at 9 PM

NEXT MEETING: MAY 8

Minutes prepared by Rebecca Mitchell and Nathan Merrill