

Newburyport Historical Commission 7 January 2010

Meeting Minutes

The regularly scheduled meeting of the Newburyport Historical Commission (NHC) was called to order at 7:38 in the Council Chambers, City Hall. Present: Linda Smiley, Stephen Feige, Tom Kolterjahn, Leah McGavern, and Margaret Welch. Absent: Ned McGrath.

Call to Order

Advisory Review

9 Orange Street (Craig Pessina, owner and applicant) – Mr. Pessina and his attorney Mark Griffin said that the Planning Board and Emily Wentworth of the Planning Department were comfortable with the thirty-year deed restriction for preserving the property. Ms. Wentworth said that the NHC, not the future condominium association, should enforce the restriction. The Planning Board wanted a letter from the NHC saying that it would hold the deed restriction. Mr. Pessina remained in agreement with the list of features to be protected that he and NHC member Kolterjahn had developed. Chair Smiley and member Kolterjahn spoke in favor of the project. The NHC voted to hold a thirty-year lease on the property contingent on approval of the deed restriction (5 yes, 1 absent). Attorney Griffin said that he could email the draft the next day. The letter to the Planning Board was needed by the 20th.

Ms. Wentworth told member Kolterjahn that she was putting together a list of properties with preservation restrictions. She suggested that Planning Board members talk to NHC members about the 6C permitting process.

Review of Minutes

Minutes of 19 November approved with emendations (4 yes, 1 abstention, 1 absent). An error in the 3 December minutes re: the proposed height of the roof compared to the parapet was corrected, and the minutes were approved (4 yes, 1 abstention, 1 absent). Minutes of 17 December approved with emendations (4 yes, 1 abstention, 1 absent).

Old Business

NHC members will attempt to set up an appointment with architect Andy Sidford to view two recent rehabilitation projects Saturday, 16 January at 9:00.

Chair Smiley suspended the public meeting at 8:05 and opened the public hearing for 254 High Street (partial demolition).

Public Hearing

Michael Staiti of Keystone Development made the presentation for the “White Horse Village” project. The back portion including the attached barn would be removed, and townhouses would be added. Mr. Staiti showed the Carter Street elevation but said that it contained errors. When NHC members questioned him about the relative heights, he said that the new roofline of the proposed building would be higher than that of the front building facing High Street – the top of the ridge of the front building was 28 feet and the top of the ridge of the new buildings would be 30 feet. He said that the sloping gradient would lessen the visual difference between the heights. NHC members Feige and Smiley said that definitive elevations were needed. Mr. Staiti showed the site plan showing that the new buildings would be recessed.

Chair Smiley asked the audience for comments in favor of the project. Dr. Howard Fairweather of 4 Parsons Street and former NHC chair said that his wife owned 27 Eagle Street. He said that, although he would prefer the barn to remain, that it was probably not realistic to expect such a plan given the economics. He said that the present plan was “useful” and probably better than other future scenarios and that the reputation of the development firm was good. Eric Comiskey of 19 Eagle Street said that the project incorporated aspects of the neighborhood and that he supported the project. David Smith of 248 High Street thought the proposal improved the property and Phillip Kurtzler of 252 High Street said that the project would be an improvement. Chair Smiley read into the record an email of support from Pat Fuller of 24 Eagle Street and a letter of support from Luceille Roaf, an abutter. She also read an email from Martha Crawshaw French who described her father’s financial situation. The current real estate broker described how one deal fell through due to the rental rolls being deemed insufficient for the mortgage and distributed a history of the listing (the property went on the market September 2007 and has had four brokers). Sarah White, 249 High Street, said that she was concerned about the lack of definitive plans and the amount of proposed lot coverage. The “running together” of houses was not appropriate to Newburyport. She also was curious why the barn had to come down and asked how the main house would be restored. Mr. Crawshaw spoke about the smaller amount of persons projected to be living on the property, therefore lessening the parking needs. Mr. Staiti said that he would retain the interior features of the woodwork and circular staircase of the main house.

Chair Smiley asked the audience for comments in opposition to the project. She read into the record an email from Christopher Adam and Amber Klein-Adam saying that they opposed removal of part of the original structure and that the scale of the project seemed inconsistent with the surrounding homes.

The Chair closed the public comment portion of the hearing at 8:35.

Member Kolterjahn voiced concern about the relationship between the extant house’s height to that of the proposed buildings. Member Feige was concerned about the proposed buildings visually moving “towards” High Street instead of sloping downward and “away” as the present structure does. Member Kolterjahn was concerned about the massing and loss of the barn; the

proposed massing overwhelms the building. Member McGavern said that the middle facades looked “puffed up” compared to those of the end buildings. She emphasized that the older houses have a human-sized scale. It was pointed out that the requirement for parking in back put pressure on the builder and designer to “bulk up” the houses. Mr. Staiti said that the houses’ massing could change if parking could be placed in front on the sides of the units. When member Feige asked whether the barn could be removed and incorporated as an end unit or perhaps a garage, Mr. Staiti replied no and said that his firm had found rehabilitation not economically feasible in the past. When asked by Chair Smiley whether they would consider fewer units, Mr. Staiti said no.

Chair Smiley said that she did not like the potential loss of the barn and that the NHC had to decide whether it favored keeping the barn no matter what is proposed. Member McGavern said that the barn is not now apparent to viewers and questioned the value of replicating on speculation the look of the original barn. Member Kolterjahn said the barn could be restored. It was established that the barn was built in 1852 at the time of the main house. Member Feige asked whether the barn could be shifted 90 degrees. Member Welch said that the barn does not “read” as a barn and that the NHC could have more control over the property if the barn’s demolition was approved. Member Feige pointed out that the overhanging roofline signified that that portion was built as a barn. Member McGavern said that the public support could not be ignored. Members Smiley and McGavern regretted the loss of barns in Newburyport. They repeated their suggestions previously made concerning parking and façade massing improving the project. Mr. Staiti will ask the Planning Office and Building Inspector whether parking on the Carter Street side was possible. Member Feige said that more control over how the main building was restored would help justify the barn removal. The NHC voted to continue the public hearing until 4 February at which time the decision on demolition delay will be made with the understanding that the NHC will allow demolition of the barn if the plans to be amended are approved (4 yes, 1 no, 1 absent).

New Business

NHC Chair said that a lawsuit concerning the 84-86 State Street case had been brought against the NHC. Sean Sullivan, the Planning Director, asked the NHC to vote on the need for legal council. The NHC voted to ask the City to provide legal council (5 yes, 1 absent).

Correspondence Received

Letter received re: telecommunications signal in the steeple of the Central Congregational Church. The NHC will discuss the matter next meeting.

New Business (cont.)

Powder House Restoration – Member Kolterjahn gave an update on the progress including a new copper finial donated by Robert Sadowski, a new roof, and the top eight rows of bricks. When

he suggested that the NHC write a letter of recommendation to the CPC for funding the chain link fence required by the National Guard, Member Welch, the NHC representative to CPC, said the CPC greatly preferred funding “bricks and mortar” projects directly related to restoration.

Meeting ended 9:25