



CITY OF NEWBURYPORT  
HISTORICAL COMMISSION  
60 PLEASANT STREET • P.O. BOX 550  
NEWBURYPORT, MA 01950  
(978) 465-4400  
WWW.CITYOFNEWBURYPORT.COM

## DOD Supplemental Report

Meeting Date 25 June, 2020  
Property Address 93 State Street  
Applicant Institution for Savings; Atty. Lisa Mead, MTC

**Project description:** Build a 2-story addition to the existing structure, with parking on the ground level and office space on upper story.

**Plan(s) of Record:** For this “supplement,” we referred to the latest revised plans submitted 2020.

### **Purpose of this supplemental report:**

The Newburyport Historical Commission (NHC) submitted our advisory report to the Planning Board on 18 February, 2020, based on the plans that were originally submitted for review. Since that time, the applicant has made substantial changes to those plans, and the Planning Board has asked the NHC to review the new plans and produce a report or make recommendations, if any, to the Planning Board which is continuing to review this matter.

The NHC discussed the new plans at our 25 June meeting, with individual members reviewing the recently published plans, and preparing comments in advance when possible. The NHC also permitted the applicant, represented by counsel, and members of the public to offer brief comments at the meeting.

In this report, I (that is, chair Richards) will summarize what I view as the key findings that were brought forward, and shall make clear which views are my own and which are those that reflect the majority opinion of the commission.

### **Executive Summary**

It is clear that a majority of the commission has concluded that these plans do little to address the single biggest objection stated in February, that the way in which the overall mass and/or volume of the proposed addition is expressed would result in a structure that does not harmonize well with its immediate setting. This is contrary to Department of Interior guidance that a new addition on an historic building be compatible not only with the scale, massing and design of the subject building, but also harmonious with the context buildings surrounding its site. These guidelines include statements such as “additions to historic buildings must be evaluated not only by how they affect the building itself but by how they affect the district in which the building is located.” The city’s DOD ordinance states that “New construction within the DOD shall not disrupt the essential form and integrity of the subject

historic building...structure, the lot where it is located, or its setting within the DOD...New construction shall be compatible with the size, scale, height, color, material and character of the subject historic building...lot where it is located, and its setting within the DOD.” Nearly all (all but two) of the public comments reflected this view as well.

The applicant’s counsel correctly pointed out that the lot upon which the addition is proposed is zoned for commercial use, and the planned structure meets the necessary zoning requirements. They suggest that they should therefore be allowed to build as planned “by right.” If there were no DOD ordinance, this would probably be true. As chair, I tried to explain that the task of the NHC, according to that ordinance, is to evaluate how well the plans adhere to the provisions of the DOD ordinance and to do so as fairly and objectively as we can. To that last point, at least one member of the commission spoke at some length to the sterling reputation of the Institution for Savings, which he hoped would ensure that they are treated fairly and with the respect they deserve.

### **Additional comments**

Since so much of the debate and discussion is about the potential impact of the proposed building on the neighborhood, it is worth noting that it’s not only the local residents who believe that they live in a particularly significant locale. Among the historical materials that have been uncovered is that fact that Prospect Street was found to be of sufficient historical interest to merit documentation in a “Form G,” which is used by the Massachusetts Historical Commission to document a local area or streetscape, similar to the way a “Form B” is used to document an individual structure. This is an important data point establishing the recognized historical significance of this neighborhood.

Commissioner Morgan provided data which gave a degree of objectivity to the perception, voiced by a majority of members, that the proposed addition “overwhelmed” the historic 93 State Street building, despite its position to the rear of the lot which does make it appear less intrusive when viewed from State Street. The problem arises when considering the immediate environment along Prospect Street and Otis Place. There, the addition still looms large, and appears intrusive due to the combination of its actual size compounded by materials and designs that are in sharp contrast with those of neighboring structures.

**Note:** Estimates of comparative volumes show that the addition is more than twice as ‘big’ as the historical building. We used volume rather than square footage in this case because much of the overall size is driven by the large parking area, which is excluded from some reported square footage figures.

The board recognizes that the applicant has made efforts to better merge with the residential area, but some of these have their own issues. For example, the application of bays that mimic those found on many nearby residences are badly out of scale (too large) because of the unusual height of the first floor, which is in turn dictated by the proposed parking system. The bays are also clearly ‘cosmetic’ rather than driven by a functional requirement, as a normal residential bay is driven by the desire for enhanced interior light and space.

Mr. Morgan offered some ideas that might help make the building *appear* smaller than it is, but as with all our suggestions, these are not specific recommendations but rather ideas

that we hope provide helpful illustrations. For example, the proposed design rises straight from grade to a large and prominent cornice at the highest level, which has the effect of emphasizing its height. If an eave, 'gutter line' or similar horizontal break were established lower down, at a height more in line with the eaves of nearby houses, and the building above attenuated somewhat, such as by a slight step-back, the impression of height could be lessened. Fenestration at the upper level that better reflects the interior office space might also help.

Another idea discussed was a 'transition' in cladding materials from masonry to clapboards on the sides that directly abut residences (that is, not the elevation facing State Street), which could provide better integration into, and compatibility with, the neighborhood. The property can be considered as having two distinct areas: the clearly commercial (and masonry) area facing Northwest toward State Street, and the more residential area along Prospect Street, Otis Place and the backyards of Garden Street. To use clapboards on a commercial building is not unprecedented, as this photo taken on Storey Ave. illustrates:



*Illustration 1: A commercial building on Storey Ave.*

What more is there to say? One of our members provided this quote from the historical architect in the Office of Historic Preservation at the National Park Service: "To the degree that the existing neighborhood context has a positive, consistent, and valued character, and to the degree that the proposed design would substantially alter that character, the proposed design must bear the burden of proof for demonstrating that the benefits to the neighborhood context and to the city as a whole will outweigh the residual unavoidable harm that would be done to the sense of place. The location of the burden of proof is upon the architects who propose the change."

It is **my own** view that there is inherent conflict between the “program” – that is, the desire to accommodate a considerable amount of parking and additional office space in a relatively small area; and the “context” – the fact that we are trying to accommodate a large commercial addition onto a relatively small commercial, but highly historic, building. On top of that, we are trying to do so on a lot that is zoned for commercial use but is not all that large and projects like a peninsula into a old and well established residential neighborhood. Further conflicts appear to be arise from competing city requirements: for example, how much of the size and volume of the proposed structure is driven by city-mandated parking requirements? It seems to me that these competing and conflicting goals will be very hard to reconcile. The original report also mentioned competing goals of a different sort, such as designing an addition which is compatible with the historic building, yet differentiated from it. With skill and imagination, I think those latter competing goals might be resolved. As to the former ones, resolving those may be, as Attorney Mead put it, “a fantasy.”

Respectfully submitted, 27 June, 2020

Glenn Richards, Chair  
Newburyport Historical Commission

**Note:** The phrase in the original report “(actually five of the six in attendance),” referring to the majority of the commission, has been deleted, because one member had been recused from the discussion of 93 State St. so the “majority” was four, not five.

- GR