

Newburyport Historical Commission

February 22, 2024

Online Meeting

Minutes

1. Call to Order

Chair Glenn Richards called an online meeting of the Newburyport Historical Commission to order at 7:00 p.m.

2. Roll Call

In attendance were members Biff Bouse, Joe Morgan, Glenn Richards, Andrew Bernhardt and Chris Sawtelle and alternate members Allen Marquis and Ed Noymer. Marc Cendron and Christopher Fay were absent. Also in attendance were Planning Director Andy Port, Planner Katelyn Sullivan and note taker Gretchen Joy.

3. Demolition Delay Applications

a) 14 Norman Avenue

The applicant requested a determination of the historical significance of the structure only. No plans for a replacement structure have been submitted. Glenn Richards said the house was constructed in 1947 and has no Form B. He read from Chapter 5, Article 10, of the Code of Ordinances, which indicates the Ordinance was “adopted for the purpose of preserving and protecting significant buildings or structures within the City of Newburyport which constitute or reflect distinctive features of the architectural, cultural, political, economic or social history of the city; to encourage owners of preferably-preserved significant buildings to seek out persons who might be willing to purchase and to preserve, rehabilitate, or restore such buildings or structures, rather than demolish them; and by furthering these purposes to promote the public welfare and to preserve the resources of the city.”

Applicant Braden Monaco said the house was constructed with steel beams and footings. It has no slab, basement or attic, and is 1,000 square feet, with vinyl siding and windows. He said it does not meet modern construction requirements and a modern family could not live in the home. He said the fabric of the neighborhood has changed and he does not know of anyone who would live in the house in its current condition for the price that was paid for it. His intention is to demolish the structure and construct a new single-family home that would be set further back from the street than the existing structure.

The meeting was opened to comments from the public. Stephanie Niketic, 93 High Street, said the application is incomplete. It should include a site map, description of the historic structure and plans for the replacement structure. The Assessor’s records indicate the house is 1,752 square feet. The applicant is claiming the house is structurally deficient as a basis for demolition, and should be required to submit a structural report from a licensed engineer. She went on to say that these post World War II houses were built for returning veterans. They were important to the development of the city and are a part of the city’s cultural, political, economic and social history. They provide housing diversity. The applicant claims these houses have outlived their use, but people live in them today and they have continued to have economic and reasonable use. She said

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houses of this type are historically significant. The demolition of this structure would not be in keeping with the purpose of the Ordinance, which is to preserve streetscapes, patterns of development and homes that can serve people. The public comment period was closed.

Glenn Richards responded that he believes the application meets the requirements of the Ordinance, but agreed that the Commission has the authority to require a report from a licensed engineer if the applicant claims the building is not structurally sound or the cost of its rehabilitation would be more than its economic value. If the Commission members determine the structure is historically significant, they would have the opportunity to review the plans for the replacement structure for its compatibility with the character of the street.

Biff Bouse provided the information he found while researching the property. A large parcel of land had been divided into lots that were all sold around the same time. The street is wide and once had a median. The house is of the Crackerbox style, which is the most popular style in the country. The first occupant of the structure was a welder for the Navy. He said houses outlive their occupants and the Commission members are the stewards of historically significant properties such as this. The style of the house is an important one in the history of architecture. More affordable housing is needed in the city.

Ed Noymer disagreed with the comment that a house will outlive its residents. He said the house in its current condition would not attract buyers. While he would not want the house to be replaced with a large one, the existing structure is too small for a family with children and parents that work from home.

Allen Marquis said the focus of the discussion should be on the significance of the house, and not who is going to buy it. He said this type of home is important.

Chris Sawtelle said the neighborhood is made up of typical post war housing. Most are of the same height and roofline. A great deal of building took place in this time period and it should not be written off as having no significance.

Joe Morgan said he wants to understand why houses like these are historic. According to the Ordinance, the Commission must have a reason for preserving this style of house. He is concerned that an acknowledgement that this type of home should be protected would set a precedent and would create a moratorium on building in the city. He said mobile or modular homes were also popular after the war, and he does not see the difference between those structures and this house. He said the Commission must consider if it is willing to endorse a house of this quality as a historic property to accommodate future investors or families. A transition to higher density housing would be appropriate. He said he is not sympathetic to a historical interpretation of this structure. He said value must be added to the structure to attract purchasers. It might be possible to expand behind the existing house, but he does not know what this would look like.

Glenn Richards said he is concerned about the structural soundness of the house. He said several of the houses on the street have been changed to the extent that the original style is no longer recognizable. He is not concerned about the Board setting a precedent with its decision, as all applications are considered on their own merits. He

said the size of a structure would not provide a basis for its demolition. The availability of affordable housing or the sale price of the property are not under the purview of the Commission.

The Commission members decided to visit the site to view the condition of the structure and determine how it fits with the context of the neighborhood. Under the Demolition Delay Ordinance, the Commission has 30 days to determine if a structure is preferably preserved. The next meeting would not occur until after this deadline has passed. The applicant agreed to waive the time limit for the Commission to make its decision. A site visit was scheduled for Sunday, February 25.

4. Updates from the Chair

The annual election of Chair and Vice Chair will take place at the March 14 meeting.

Andy Port said the application for CPA funding for the restoration of the Bartlett Mall swan fountain is to be withdrawn, as the plans for the Mall as a whole are on hold. The bids were higher than expected and it will be necessary to obtain additional funding. The bond that had previously been approved will be released. It is not known if the funds previously awarded for the fountain restoration are to be retained.

5. Minutes

Biff Bouse moved to approve the minutes of the February 8 meeting. Allen Marquis seconded the motion. The motion was approved by a 5-0 vote (Glenn Richards, yes; Biff Bouse, yes; Joe Morgan, yes; Andrew Bernhardt, abstain; Chris Sawtelle, yes; Allen Marquis, yes; Ed Noymer, absent).

6. Adjournment

Andrew Bernhardt moved to adjourn the meeting at 8:16 p.m. Chris Sawtelle seconded the motion. The motion was approved.