

HARTFORD HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
Joint Workshop with the Hartford Planning Commission
Wednesday, March 17, 2021
Draft Meeting Minutes

HHPC Members Present: Susanne Walker Abetti, Robin Adair Logan, Pat Stark, Chair Jonathan Schechtman and Selectboard Liaison Dennis Brown.

PC Members Present: Toby Dayman, Robin Adair Logan, John Reid, Dave Sherman and Chair Bruce Riddle.

Staff Present: Planning and Development Director Lori Hirshfield, Zoning Administrator Jo-Ann Ells and Town Planner Matt Osborn.

Others Present: Twin Pines Housing Trust Executive Director Andrew Winter and Planning Consultant Brandy Saxton.

A remote meeting of the Historic Preservation Commission in compliance with the Vermont Open Meeting Law was held on Wednesday, March 17, 2021. Chair Jonathan Schechtman called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m. He noted that this is a joint workshop with the Planning Commission. He proceeded to read the “Remote Public Meeting Script for Opening a Meeting” related to Act 92.

1. Demolition Standards for Historic Buildings Project: Jonathan Schechtman introduced consultant Brandy Saxton. Brandy stated that the purpose of the project is to determine whether Hartford should regulate the demolition of historic buildings.
 - a. What Structures/Areas of Town Should be Subject to Demolition Standards? Brandy Saxton provided a handout of a comparative review of demolition standards from other communities. She noted that each has a different approach to what buildings are included in the demolition standards. Standards typically address the issue of age and significance.
 - Burlington, VT: All buildings that are listed or eligible for listing on the State or National Register for Historic Places.
 - Montpelier, VT: All contributing structures on the Vermont Historic Sites and Structures Survey or the National Register for Historic Places.
 - Cambridge, MA: Any building fifty years or more old that is determined by the Cambridge Historical Commission to be a significant building.
 - Portland, ME: Any designated landmarks and all structures within designated historic districts.
 - Keene, NH: Buildings greater than 500 square feet where the building was constructed more than 50 years prior, is eligible for listing on the National Register or is in an established historic district.
 - Connecticut Model Ordinance: Any building or structure that is at least 50 years old.

Brandy noted that she did not include Shelburne or Dorset, Vermont since their standards are fairly subjective and do not have clear criteria.

Brandy noted that if you include buildings 50 years or older, it will result in a much larger number of buildings regulated by the standards.

Lori Hirshfield asked the Historic Preservation Commission and Planning Commission what should be included. Pat Stark responded that historic buildings outside of the historic districts should be included in addition to those within historic districts. Robin Adair Logan suggested anything over 50 years and that a quick review of the building can be done to determine whether it

is historically significant or not. Jonathan Schechtman stated that one of the goals of establishing demolition standards is to slow down the process of removing a building. Pat Stark agreed noting that it will provide more opportunity to do photo documentation prior to demolition.

Brandy cautioned about undertaking a big net approach when the Town has not required a demolition permit in the past noting that it can also be administratively challenging. Lori agreed stating that currently her department doesn't have the staff capacity to take on a major role. Pat suggested volunteers leading the effort to assess historic significance.

Lori stated that we have to focus on criteria that doesn't create a time and cost burden to the property owner. She cautioned that a big net approach may be too much to garner community support. Brandy agreed that there is a risk of a big net approach. She suggested focusing on the end game noting that if you impact a lot of residential property owners, you may not get support for the standards. She added that in Montpelier, there has been a backlash from homeowners that are regulated by the demolition standards.

Andrew Winter, Executive Director of the Twin Pines Housing Trust stated that he would like to provide the developer's perspective. He noted that his projects already require Vermont Division for Historic Preservation Section 106 review (impact on historic resources) since federal funding is involved with his projects. He encouraged an exemption for projects that already have a state review. Robin Adair Logan responded that we need a local review noting that she has seen many historic buildings torn in her ten years on the Historic Preservation Commission.

Dennis Brown reported that he heard about Brownfield grants that provide funds for historic preservation. He asked if that can be looked into.

b. Who Should Review Applications for Demolition of Historic Structures? Brandy noted that typically the Design Review Committee or the Historic Preservation Commission would provide an advisory role and make a recommendation to the Planning Commission who would make the final decision. She noted that an option is not to have an advisory committee with the Planning Commission handling it independently. Another option could be a new advisory committee. She presented some of the options from the comparative review.

- Burlington, VT: Two-committee review process before going to Development Review Board.
- Montpelier, VT: Design Review if in district and conditional use review by Development Review Board.
- Cambridge, MA: Determination of significance. If significant, review required to determine if preservation is preferred. Certificate of Appropriateness if a landmark or within a neighborhood conservation district.
- Portland, ME: Historic Preservation Board and Planning Board review. Certificate of economic hardship if a building is a landmark or contributing building.
- Keene, NH: Review and determination of significance if not in a historic district by Design Review Committee. Certificate of Appropriateness if in a historic district by Historic District Commission.
- Connecticut Model Ordinance: Determination of significance. If significant, review required by Historic Review Commission.

Brandy stated that standards in some communities are aimed more at delay.

Brandy stated that in Vermont, the State Statutes dictate the process that a Design Review Committee or Historic Preservation Commission are advisory only and make recommendations to the Planning Commission who make the decision. Lori stated that we need to ensure that the process works and is consistent.

Lori noted that in the White River Junction Design Review District, renovations, additions and demolitions require a design review application which is reviewed by the Design Review Committee who are advisory to the Planning Commission. Jo-Ann Ells noted that the design review process works very well with some items handled administratively. She noted that she doesn't have an accurate estimate of the number of buildings demolished in Hartford since the Town does not require a demolition permit. She will inquire with the Lister's Office to see if they have the data.

Brandy asked if the Historic Preservation Commission should be the advisory committee? Robin Adair responded yes. Jonathan Schechtman agreed stating that it is germane to its mission. Susanne Walker Abetti agreed. Pat Stark agreed but expressed concern about lacking qualifications to address economic hardship.

Dennis commented that the Hartford Energy Commission may be a good source to provide input regarding energy conservation and sustainability.

Dave Sherman stated that the Planning Commission needs guidance so he was against the Planning Commission handling applications independently and he doesn't think Hartford needs another committee. He recommends casting a smaller net and expressed concern about the cost of a financial analysis on property owners.

Lori stated that there is a level of expertise needed.

Brandy stated that we need to look at the number of structures potentially affected and the types of buildings to be included. She noted that based on the existing inventory of the historic district nominations, Historic Sites and Structures Surveys and the barn census, Hartford has a potential of having hundreds of buildings subject to demolition rules. She noted that there are numerous accessory structures and agricultural buildings, many of which are in poor condition. Brandy stated that it is important to start with a well-defined list of building to be included in the standards. Matt Osborn noted that he was surprised by the number of accessory structures that are listed as contributing properties in the historic district. The figure (149) makes up 27% of contributing buildings in the historic districts.

Jonathan Schechtman stated that it would be safer to limit the standards to contributing properties within the historic districts and include buildings over 100 years old that are historically significant. He added that the standards could always be amended later.

Bruce Riddle stated that it is most important that the process be transparent and consistent. He suggested voluntary enrollment. He expressed concern about dealing with demolition by neglect and how to enforce it. Jonathan responded that the Town do improvements and then place a lien on the property. Brandy responded that State Statutes do not allow that under zoning enabling legislation. It is only through building codes which Hartford does not have. She acknowledged the demolition by neglect is very difficult to enforce.

Matt noted that whenever a historic district is proposed, property owners are contacted. He is frequently asked if being included in the historic district will affect what they can do with their property. Matt has always responded that there are no restrictions on what they do with their buildings. In over twenty years, only one property owner insisted that their property not be included in the historic district. The change could lead to more opposition to future historic districts.

Bruce suggested that we continue to think through what we want to preserve.

Brandy stated that for the next workshop, she will prepare some draft language which she described as inclusive and expansive and will be edited at the workshop.

2. Next Workshop: Matt Osborn noted that the second joint workshop on the demolition standards will be either Monday, April 19th or Wednesday, April 21st.
3. Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 6:44 p.m.