

HARTFORD HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
Joint Workshop with the Hartford Planning Commission
Monday, May 10, 2021
Draft Workshop Minutes

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

PC Members Present: Dillon Bianchi, Toby Dayman, John Heath, Robin Adair Logan, John Reid, Chair Bruce Riddle and Selectboard Liaison Kim Souza.

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

Others Present: Planning Consultant Brandy Saxton.

A remote meeting of the Historic Preservation Commission in compliance with the Vermont Open Meeting Law was held on Monday, May 10, 2021. HHPC Chair Jonathan Schechtman called the meeting to order at 5:30 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. Minutes of the April 19, 2021 Joint Workshop with the Planning Commission: Jonathan Schechtman asked if there are any corrections to the Minutes of April 19th. Susanne Walker Abetti noted a correction. Robin Adair Logan made a motion to approve the Minutes of April 19th with the noted correction. The motion was seconded by Susanne Walker Abetti and unanimously approved.
2. Demolition Standards for Historic Buildings: Consultant Brandy Saxton started by summarizing the April 19th workshop and the need for more refining of the standards. She briefly touched on Section G. Planning Commission Review.

Section H. Determination of Community Impact and Benefit. Brandy Saxton noted that historic buildings have community benefit, but it can be challenging to articulate that to the public which is key to making a case for demolition review. John Reid noted that in order to determine community benefit for a demolition, we need to know what the building is being replaced with. An empty lot by itself doesn't provide a community benefit. Brandy responded that a reuse/redevelopment plan can be required, but noted that the White River Junction Design Review District regulations doesn't have that requirement.

John Reid noted that there is a presumption that a building doesn't have a community benefit unless there is strong and convincing evidence. He thinks the issue can have a subjective evaluation. Bruce Riddle stated that we have a lot of work to do to demonstrate community benefit. It is not currently part of Hartford's culture. He suggested providing incentives to property owners not to demolish a historic building. Toby Dayman stated that he is reluctant to deny a property owner use of their property. As a result, he is not sure how best to define community benefit. Dillon Bianchi agreed with Toby and John. Jonathan Schechtman stated that he understands the concern about property rights. He noted that the focus doesn't have to be on stopping demolition, but rather providing a delay to examine alternatives to demolition and documentation of a historic building. Brandy Saxton noted that the Connecticut model demolition ordinance focuses entirely on delaying demolition. She added that Hartford already is doing demolition review in the White River Junction Design Review District.

Dennis Brown noted that he has served on the Planning Commission, Zoning Board of Adjustment, Liaison for the Historic Preservation Commission as well as serving briefly on the Historic Preservation Commission. He stated that by requiring a zoning permit for demolition, a delay will provide time for options. If nothing else, it will provide an opportunity for documentation. Brandy noted that Towns that have zoning typically require a permit for demolition, but only a few require a process for demolishing historic buildings. John Heath stated that he agrees with Dennis that a permit provides checks and balances as well as ensuring safety. He doesn't view it as overly restrictive. Toby Dayman agreed noting the importance of ensuring health and safety related to demolition.

Lori Hirshfield noted that she found that the Design Review Committee pause moment has given people the tools and information to consider alternatives to demolition.

Section I. Structural Soundness: Regarding structural soundness, Brandy Saxton noted that it is straight forward. All it takes is a determination by an engineer or architect that a building is no longer structurally sound. Robin Adair Logan agreed noting that it is very costly to salvage an unsound building. Bruce Riddle expressed concern about the cost to a property owner to hire a professional to make the determination. He suggested that the Town set up a fund to assist property owners with the expense. Robin Adair responded that it is not that expensive and there are grants that are available.

Section J. Economic Hardship: Brandy Saxton stated that economic hardship is the hardest to determine. She noted that Montpelier has specific criteria and Shelburne's is general. In the Downtown White River Junction Design Review District, the section relating to economic hardship is very general. Robin Adair Logan agreed that economic hardship is difficult to deal with and noted that older historic buildings are hard to maintain. She is concerned that it may lead to benign neglect. John Heath stated that it happens a lot to older houses in Vermont. He added that the cost to demolish a house is high. Brandy noted that the current draft standards do not address demolition by neglect.

Dillon Bianchi expressed concern that a property owner may have to pay a professional to address economic hardship. Bruce Riddle suggested treating income producing properties differently from owner-occupied dwellings. John Heath agreed.

Robin Adair Logan stated that a pause opportunity allows time to look at options to demolition like connecting with people who buy historic buildings.

Bruce Riddle asked if there is a privacy clause for information an applicant provides to address economic hardship. Brandy Saxton responded no. Information submitted to the Planning Commission is public information.

Lori Hirshfield asked if we are just looking at a pause, is it necessary to get into economic hardship? Brandy Saxton responded potentially. John Reid stated that it seems like we are headed for a delay only and that foregoing criteria is a better way to go. Jonathan Schechtman stated that by delaying demolition, it provides an opportunity to allowing a non-profit to come in and provide expertise.

Bruce Riddle suggested that a demolition permit be required for all buildings to be demolished, noting that there are health and safety issues too. If a building is over 100 years old, there will be a delay to allow time to consider alternatives to demolition. Robin Adair Logan agreed.

3. Next Steps: Matt Osborn noted that the schedule to close out the CLG Grant calls for the project to be completed by August 1st. We will need to schedule a community meeting, have time to respond to community input, make revisions and then present recommendations to the Selectboard for their feedback. Matt noted that there is a chance we could get a 1-2 month extension to give us more breathing room which he will inquire about. Matt suggested Thursday, June 3rd at 6:30 p.m. as the date for the community meeting. The Historic Preservation Commission and Planning Commission agreed. Jonathan Schechtman asked if Brandy has decided what she plans on presenting at the community meeting. Brandy responded that she is meeting with staff on Thursday to discuss the specifics, but she is planning to talk through the issues and not present specific standards at this point. She plans on preparing a slide show. Jonathan suggested showing photos of former historic buildings that were demolished.
4. Adjournment: Susanne Walker Abetti made a motion to adjourn. The motion was seconded by Robin Adair Logan and approved unanimously. The meeting adjourned at 7:07 p.m.