

ASHFIELD HISTORICAL COMMISSION
THURSDAY, APRIL 30, 2014
7:30 PM
APPROVED MINUTES

PRESENT:

Commission members Steve Gougeon, Mollie Babize, Nancy Garvin
Planning Board members: Michael Fitzgerald, Ken Miller, Alan Rice
Other public: Arnold Jones, Mary Snow, Jody Hall

Meeting called to order 7:36 pm

IMPACT OF CELL TOWERS ON HISTORIC PROPERTIES

Planning Board and Historical Commission each received a letter dated 3/21/14 from Meghan Bezio, architectural historian with EBI, an environmental consulting firm, concerning a proposed 120' monopole cell tower on the Robertson Farm in South Ashfield (EBI project #61142499). The letter cites Section 106, of the National Historic Preservation Act, which apparently requires a negative determination before the FCC can issue a license to AT&T for this transmission tower. It is not clear what basis such a determination would require, or what authority the Commission would have for denying a tower. Alan Rice reported that Shelburne rejected one application, stating it interfered with scenic views prioritized in the town's master plan, but Ashfield has no such master plan. Ms. Bezio had requested a response within a month of the letter's date, so the issue may be moot in any case. No action taken.

Michael Fitzgerald said at least one other cell tower might come to the Planning Board for a similar review.

SENIOR HOUSING PROPOSAL

The Planning Board is reviving a decade-old effort to make it easier to build senior housing on individual lots in the center of town. They inquired whether the Historic Commission would want to have input into architectural guidelines for renovation of existing structures or construction of new ones, to protect the character of the Ashfield Plain Historic District.

The proposal, still being crafted by the Planning Board, would establish a Senior Housing District which would allow property owners to either subdivide existing structures or build new multi-unit housing for people 55 and older. As many as seven units per acre would be allowed, with a maximum of 14 bedrooms per acre, with total finished building not to exceed 9,000 square feet. No more than 10% of the units within the proposed district would be designated for senior housing. Whether or not this district would encourage or allow some additional mixed use in the proposed new units is still being discussed by the Planning Board.

Architectural review would be similar to a Design Review Board, with specific guidelines that would stipulate what would "fit" within the district. This would be a separate board, but could be comprised of the same people who are on the Historical

Commission. Currently, the Planning Board sends out forms to the Board of Health and the Conservation Commission for their sign-off when presented with development proposals – Does the Historical Commission want to be included as well?

Concerns:

- renovated/new structures could be larger than any existing residential building in the historic district
- NG should we exclude any structure built prior to 1850? Or designate a smaller area with less impact on the historic core?
- AR nothing prevents any owner from tearing down an older building – no demo delay; this might be a way of preserving larger structures.
- Mary Snow: cutting edge thinking about senior housing is to integrate units with younger families – not just neighborhood, but housing itself. Cites Ashfield House as an appropriate facility. (but how to protect units for those intended? Not cheat) – would be up to a condominium association to monitor who was living there.
- MF don't change alignment of historic district: responds to topo and location of amenities, infrastructure

Steve Gougeon asked about precedents: what other towns have created such a district? Williamsburg has similar zoning, said Michael Fitzgerald; also, take a look at the Northampton guidelines for new construction in their historic district.

There is no immediate deadline on this proposal; the Historical Commission will discuss further at another meeting.

PROPOSED ANTENNAE ON THE TOWN HALL STEEPLE

Jody Hall, Mary Snow and Arnold Jones remained for a discussion of Chris Gray's proposal to place wireless internet antennae on the Town Hall Steeple. The Historical Commission conveyed a conditional consent to the Select Board following a vote at the January 27, 2014 meeting, provided the antennae were temporary, that structural and visual impact be minimized, and that a removal strategy including insurance against damage be part of the contract. The conditional and temporary nature of this consent has not been widely reported; instead, most reports say the Historical Commission approved the antennae outright.

Nancy Garvin again recused herself from any decisions, but participated in the discussion. The Historical Society newsletter for May 2014 will focus on the 200th anniversary of town hall and the centennial of Belding Library.

Jody Hall has done considerable research on the architecture and history of the town hall, a report of which appeared in the March 10, 2014 issue of the Shelburne Falls & West County Independent. In her opinion, the slender columns are a significant feature of the steeple, and the three proposed antennae would create a visual imbalance not in keeping with the building. Although the steeple has one attachment, namely the municipal police antenna, she argued this would set a dangerous precedent.

The temporary timeframe for the antennae has also been called into question, with varying reports of five to 20 years. Seen initially as a temporary bandaid as presented by Chris Gray to the Commission in January, it now is unclear whether this is a more permanent proposal than the Commission is comfortable with.

Steve Gougeon stressed the active uses of the town hall, and the many changes it has undergone in 200 years, not all of them historically sensitive. Nevertheless, he does not believe the building should be treated as a museum, but rather respond to the community's needs and activities. However, given the additional architectural information, and the lack of clarity about how long the antennae would be there, he is "on the fence."

Mary Snow said she is not opposed to WiFi in town; however, she asked the Commission to recommend against the antennae, saying this building is a center of the town's cultural life, and its integrity should be protected.

Arnold Jones endorsed Jody Hall's thorough research. He participated in the restoration of the steeple 30 years ago, and stated how many people donated time, skill, resources and money to support the restoration. The Massachusetts Historical Commission awarded the steeple committee a preservation award for their work. He urged the Commission to oppose the addition of any antennae to the steeple.

Jody Hall again noted the special and unique architectural form of the steeple, and urged the Commission to oppose the addition of internet panels/antennae to the steeple. The Select Board needs your help, she said, to oppose this proposal.

Mollie Babize said with the additional information, and the obvious misrepresentation of the Commission's prior conditional approval, it might be necessary to revisit the decision and at the least clarify the concerns previously expressed. Steve Gougeon agreed, stating he was recorded at the Select Board's January 27th meeting stating the conditions, but that the Commission should clarify that our approval was more nuanced and less absolute than it has been reported.

The Commission will take this issue up at their next meeting when there is a quorum that can vote on it.

TOWN HALL 200TH ANNIVERSARY

Nancy Garvin reported the Town Hall Building Committee is planning to hold an open house on Saturday, July 19th, with a tour by Stuart Harris speaking to the changes to town hall over time. Brian Clark has created two large panels of photographs illustrating the history of the building. (The Belding Library will celebrate a rededication on August 23-24.)

The Commission agreed to lower their expectations of what could be accomplished by the summer, but agreed to the following:

- We can stake out the general area in the old cemetery on Norton Hill where the building was originally located

- We could still lead a walk following the route by which the building was moved
- Mollie offered to draw elevations and floor plans of the original building which could be posted within town hall during the open house

Other earlier ideas, such as the harvest supper and sponsoring a series of talks, were jettisoned in the interest of keeping the celebration simple. Steve offered to create posters or fliers to promote the celebration.

Nancy hopes to put together a commemorative booklet, including the historic research she has done and old photographs.

The Town Hall Committee will next meet Monday, May 12th. Nancy suggested a joint meeting of the Commission and the Committee to discuss plans. Steve will go; Mollie may have a conflict.

NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Historical Commission will be held May 12, 2014, with the Town Hall Committee. The next regular meeting was not scheduled.

Meeting was adjourned at 9:32 pm

Submitted by Mollie Babize