

HARTFORD HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION
Joint Workshop with the Hartford Planning Commission
Monday, April 19, 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, 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: Planning Consultant Brandy Saxton.

A remote meeting of the Historic Preservation Commission in compliance with the Vermont Open Meeting Law was held on Monday, April 19, 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 March 17, 2021 Joint Workshop with the Planning Commission: Jonathan Schechtman asked if there are any corrections to the Minutes of March 17th. Susanne Walker Abetti noted a correction. Robin Adair Logan noted a correction. Susanne made a motion to approve the Minutes of March 17th with the noted corrections. The motion was seconded by Robin Adair and unanimously approved.
2. Demolition Standards for Historic Buildings Project: Matt Osborn noted that consultant Brandy Saxton prepared a memo and draft standards prior to the meeting and that we will be going through each of them this evening. Brandy noted that the purpose of the project is to determine whether Hartford should regulate the demolition of historic buildings. If so, the standards would be incorporated into Zoning Regulations. She suggested that we go through the draft standards section by section.

Section A. Purpose: There were no comments.

Section B. Historic Preservation Commission as Advisory Committee: There were no comments.

Section C. Applicability:

Discussion Point #1: What Historic Structures Should be Subject to Demolition Standards? Brandy Saxton noted that based on the last workshop, we are going with a 100-year cut-off instead of a 50-year cut-off that is used to determine eligibility for the National Register of Historic Places. Brandy noted that if you include buildings 50 years or older, it will result in a much larger number of buildings that would be regulated by the standards.

John Reid asked why an age trigger is being used. He prefers having a listing of historic structures. Brandy Saxton responded that using an age-based trigger avoids a direct linkage between the National Register listings and local regulations. Using an age-based trigger also is highly equitable. She added the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation opposes tying the standards to historic districts for fear that it will lead to opposition to future historic district nominations. Brandy stated that at the last workshop, there was consensus to go with the 100-year age-based cut-off and to make a determination of historic significance.

John Reid stated that the standards should be voluntary since he believes the standards would infringe on the rights of property owners.

Robin Adair Logan noted that there are many historically significant structures in Hartford that are not part of historic districts. She noted that the proposed process doesn't prohibit demolition. Rather, it requires a permit to give the Town time to look at alternatives and photo document the building. It is an opportunity for pausing. She stated that many Vermont communities require a permit for demolition.

Susanne Walker Abetti stated that Downtown White River Junction plays an important tourism role and its historic character is a significant part of it. She would hate to see the loss of any more historic buildings Downtown.

Lori Hirshfield noted that the demolition review process could result in expense to the property owner. The determination of economic hardship issue has teeth that is more than advisory. She suggested that with developing standards, we may want to start with less.

Dennis Brown stated that providing opportunities to property owners for grants is a positive. He also likes the approach that if all else fails, provide photo documentation.

Dave Sherman stated that he agrees with John Reid and is concerned about the impact of the demolition standards on the property owner. He suggested keeping the standards simple. He supports creating an opportunity for conversation, the possibility of grant funding and photo documentation, but expressed concern about the potential difficulty administering and enforcing the standards.

Discussion Point #2: What Should Be Considered Demolition? John Heath suggested establishing a percentage of the building that is affected. Pat Stark responded that from a historic point of view, photo documentation is the key. Regarding relocation of a historic building, John Heath stated that he considers it the same as demolition.

Section D. Exemptions: Brandy Saxton asked if anyone had comments on the exemptions. There were no comments.

Discussion Point #3 Should There be an Exemption for Properties Subject to Section 106 Review? Lori Hirshfield responded yes. She noted that as a Certified Local Government, the Hartford Historic Preservation Commission is notified for projects that receive a Section 106 review and are invited to comment.

Section E. Accessory Structures: Brandy Saxton noted that the current draft has a separate process for all accessory structures. A zoning permit is not required for demolition. However, there is a 30-day delay period to allow for photo documentation. Toby Dayman suggested establishing a size cut-off for accessory structures requiring a determination of historic significance. Robin Adair Logan thinks that all accessory structures 100 years old should require a permit for demolition. John Heath agreed noting that accessory structures can have more historic significance than the primary structure. Pat Stark also agreed. Brandy noted that FEMA uses a definition of small accessory structures as anything 500 square feet or smaller.

Dave Sherman doesn't think accessory structures should be required to have a zoning permit for demolition. He also doesn't think the Historic Preservation Commission should be making the determination of historic significance. Bruce Riddle recommends having a small net of historic

buildings that require a zoning permit. He suggested focusing protection of historic buildings that are important to the landscape.

Lori Hirshfield noted that including accessory structures makes the net fairly large. She suggested that to be successful, the standards need to be manageable, not create a high demand for staff's time and be accepted by the community.

Matt Osborn noted the large number of accessory structures that are listed as contributing properties in the historic districts. The figure (149) makes up 27% of contributing buildings. He also noted that according to the 2009 Barn Census, there were 116 agricultural buildings that were built prior to 1921, accounting for 56% of all agricultural buildings.

3. Next Steps: Brandy Saxton suggested a workshop to focus on Section G. (Planning Commission Review). She noted that it shouldn't be too far out since we have to stick to a schedule. It would be preferable to hold the community meeting in June rather than July since meeting attendance typically falls off in July. Brandy noted that the Historic Preservation Commission does not have a formal role in reviewing the application. Jonathan Schechtman stated that he believes the Historic Preservation Commission has sufficient expertise to make a determination of historic significance and to counsel applicants about alternatives to demolition.
4. Next Workshop: It was agreed to hold the workshop on Monday, May 10th at 5:30 p.m.
5. Adjournment: The meeting was adjourned at 7:07 p.m.