

Heritage Commission Demolition Meeting

August 31, 2021

Draft Minutes

Members Present: Jay Myers, Chairman, John Merkle, Vice Chair, Julie Gilman, Select Board, John Grueter, Planning Board Rep., Pam Gjettum, Bill Campbell

Jay Myers, Chairman, called meeting to order at 7:00 pm in the Nowak Room of the Exeter Town Office Building.

Agenda - What the Heritage Commission does and then it will be open to the public for discussion, The Heritage Commission does for the Historical Resources what the Conservation Commission does for natural resources. They offer valuable means for local governments to manage, recognize and protect historical and cultural resources. This process involves advising and assisting local boards.

Jay said what triggered the commission having a public meeting tonight was that on July 20th a building permit and application for demolition was applied for at 10 Wadleigh Street. The structure is over fifty years old and this triggers the Heritage Commission to do a demolition review.

Jay stated that on August 3rd, a group of commission members met at the site with the property owner who allowed them to tour the property. The members agreed that the structure contributed to the character and nature of the neighborhood and because of this, asked for a delay of demolition of the permit for thirty days until there is a public hearing which the commission scheduled within the thirty day period and that is what brings them here today.

Jay said there are not many demolition reviews that make it to the hearing level. He said the two most recent for the commission was 374 Water Street, which was at the end of the Swasey Parkway. The hearing took place on November 18th and despite the commission's advice to recondition the property, the property was taken down and a new home put in its place. Most recently, 110 High Street. They had a public hearing in 2019 and the commission advised that the property be renovated or reconditioned and it was.

10 Wadleigh Street is at the corner of Forest and Wadleigh. It falls within what is proposed as a Neighborhood Heritage Area.

Julie said they need to open the public hearing at this point and she made a motion to open the public hearing on demolition at 10 Wadleigh Street. John Merkle seconded. All were in favor and the hearing is now open.

Jay said 10 Wadleigh Street falls within a proposed Heritage Neighborhood Area that was surveyed by the NH Division of Historic Resources in 2019. Information about this area is on the commission's web page. In this document, this structure was estimated to have been built in 1870 as a single family residence. This ends Jay's introduction and he opens the floor to any comments or discussion. Pam asked if the property owners were there and it appears there were none.

Julie stated that she thinks the public needs to know why the commission recommended preservation of the building. They felt it was more appropriate to keep it there maybe with some renovations. Julie said they thought there was enough integrity to the building to recommend that it be reused.

Jay then asked if anyone would like to speak about the property. One resident stated that she would like to know more about why the commission wants it preserved. She said it is a very old house and she has been in it before.

The slides were shown again and Julie said she thought the original house, cape style, had enough integrity and its presentation to the street on the corner was a traditional way that these houses would be situated, much like the one on High Street with a house and a barn back further.

Mary Hanson from Walnut Street spoke and she had just a procedural question. You asked for a thirty day extension for the demolition but now we are like 29 days into that 30 days so is it even going to mean anything?

Julie said they had to work with the owner who is not here, and the zoning ordinance that we were very conservative with the process because they looked at a couple of other towns that have a 90 day work stop on demolition. After the commission makes its recommendation tonight, it will go to the Code Enforcement Officer. He then has the authority to tell the applicant, I want to go with this recommendation or go ahead and tear it down.

Paul Degrandis(?) from Oak Street spoke and said his house is similar in setup. They have an old attached barn that they have now turned into a living space. He said he and his wife are trying to put life back into the neighborhood. He said originally they were going to demolish the barn but they saw a map from the early 1900s and their house was on that map with the barn. Once they saw the map, they were determined to preserve the house and barn.

Nate Piper from 8 Forest Street said his house is the same vintage. He said he is not opposed to any demolition and he is not opposed to new construction and building when it warrants it. The house that is under review tonight is a good representation of the neighborhood. There are a lot of small houses that built this community a long time ago and they all are from the same age. He said they all go to great lengths to preserve those and it is very representative of the neighborhood. He said they are all making an effort so it is unfortunate that somebody is just taking the easy route out and it is frustrating.

Jennifer Lechere spoke and she lives at 6 Forest Street. She said it is an old home and does make the character of the neighborhood. She has heard many stories from the previous owner. She said there is a lot of history with this house. She actually wanted to buy it. She feels this home could be renovated. She thinks it is a cool house and it should be kept. She does not want to look at a new block with no character. She said that procedurally this goes to the Building Inspector for review. She said her understanding when she made her offer on the house is that any rebuilding that was done had to be within the original configuration of the house and the proposal she is seeing on record is not even close to that. What is the appeal process for this?

Julie said she does not understand why someone told her that anything new had to fit the footprint of what it says because that is not correct. Whoever is working on that site and whatever they are going to replace, as long as it stays within the set facts from the property line, then they are ok.

Bill asked if it had to go through the Planning Board and Julie said no.

Next to speak is Matt Silva who apologized for coming in late. He is part of the building team for 10 Wadleigh Street. He said he does not have anything to directly say, but he will answer any questions that he can. His company specializes in building high performance energy efficient homes. He said he was asked to come and give his professional opinion on whether or not the house could be rebuilt, redesigned in a way that would meet code. He said looking at the house now it cannot essentially be rebuilt to meet code in a way that it should be. He said they are looking at putting a house there that is extremely beneficial comparatively to what is there now.

Eileen Flockhart said they cannot turn back the clock on who bought the lot and what they would like to do but she thinks that other issues that pertain to the neighborhood and the feel of it, you would look at a house like that and say maybe there is a young couple who would be willing to take over this house and over the course of 15 years to do what needed to be done and raise a family and be there. Her concern is in both sustainability and all of that as well as the neighborhood's sense of community and is this going to be something like the folks here who live in this neighborhood could not afford when they were starting out.

Doug Flockhart from 7 Jacks Court spoke and said his home was built with fire sale scrap. He said like most of the houses in this neighborhood, it fit in. When they renovated, they made sure that it still fit in with the neighborhood. He said he knows a lot of the people who live in this neighborhood because their daughter lives in the neighborhood. He strongly urges that this house not be demolished because it does fit in with the character of the neighborhood. He has not seen the design of what would replace this house, but he feels that it is not going to fit in with the character of the neighborhood. He does not see how it could.

Lindsay Sonnett of 1 Salem Street said she and her husband are proud owners of a very old house that needs a lot of work. They are taking the painstaking task of putting it back to life. She is very much in favor of this house not being demolished.

Nate Piper spoke again and said there is no doubt about and he thinks Mr. Silva can build a fantastic house. He said the discussion here is whether this house should be saved. He said he understands where Mr. Silva is coming from meeting modern code. He said he agrees with Doug. He has lots of friends who restored old houses and they do the same thing with boats. You are not going to meet modern code standards but you will save existing timber, existing wood and existing character.

Julie said that discussing what is proposed to replace this house if it is torn down is really not in the commission's curvue and is not going to influence their decision.

Jen Lechere from 6 Forrest Street spoke again and said there are buyers who do want to renovate this house. She said she was one of them but was outbid. She lives next door and she was looking to buy another home to give to her children.

Joel Schander spoke and said he and his wife live at 93 Park Street about 1,000 feet from the property. He said the commission has said in the past that they have no power over demolition or additions to existing structures or new construction. He said this commission cannot legally prevent the tearing down of this property so if the developer does decide to build a larger structure, we have zoning regulations in place that will constrain what they do. He said it has been brought up that this property is in a Neighborhood Heritage District and the Neighborhood Heritage District does not presently exist. It has been something the commission has been pursuing for over a year. He said according to the commission, they have no authority to stop this demolition and he thinks if the commission wants to avoid these kinds of tear downs in the future, make a strategy now to save other properties later and do so in a way that property owners will opt to join into.

Julie said just to be clear, the Neighborhood Heritage District is still in the discussion stage. It is not defined or approved by the town. The reference made to it is because they had a survey done and this building was included as a contributing resource to that report.

John Merlke said the Heritage Commission's jurisdiction is town wide and anything over fifty years old anywhere in the town, other than mobile homes. He said the fact that the Heritage Area does not exist right now is a good point, but it is not one that they are judging it on. They are judging the building for what it is.

Jay said if there was no Heritage Area proposed and it still is proposed, the Demolition Review Committee would have come to the same conclusion. It adds to the character and nature of the neighborhood as some of the abutters have identified why their properties are dear to them and the character of that is something they want to preserve. We heard their voices refer to this property in much the same way.

Matt spoke again and said hearing the comments, his goal of being here today is that he is not a developer. His company, Profile Homes has the number one goal in mind of how to make net zero energy construction affordable for every single person who wants to build a home. He said

they do not come in and tear down and rebuild unless the property dictates it. He said once again his goal for being here was to hear what the public think. His company is based in Portsmouth and they do a lot of historical work there. They are currently renovating the original fire station for the City of Portsmouth. He could have easily torn that building down, but there was no way he was going to do that. He referred to one of the public speakers and said he was right, there are times when historical value overrides code. He said for something like this, it is not. He is surprised that there is so much opposition to tearing it down and he did not know if anyone had even been inside.

Julie said she has two comments. One is we are not considering any other thing that may be happening in the neighborhood that is not part of this piece of property. The other is that they did get to go inside and our opinions differ as to what the quality of what remains and the work that would go into it.

Bill said he wished the owner was there so they could ask him what was in his mind when he decided to tear it down rather than renovate it. He said he thinks this house contributes to the character of the neighborhood.

Keith Pattison with Baker Properties spoke and said he thought Matt spoke well. He said their objective with the new house is to try and have a house that fits in with the buildings that are around it. He said they did not feel comfortable taking on the house because they feel it is really too far gone. He said the house has had a lot of work done on it over the decades.

Jay asked if there were any questions for Keith. Pam asked why he feels he cannot renovate this property.

Keith said there is a lot of work that would need to be done.

Nate fPiper from Forest Street spoke again and said his question is why did you buy it. Why do you buy a historic house without plans to renovate it?

Matt spoke and said he could renovate this house and make it stand out like a sore thumb without tearing it down. Does anyone have any feedback as to what they would actually like to see happen to this house because there is no staying value in keeping this home. The structure is not there.

Bill said there are people with different opinions and would renovate just like the 110 High Street home that was sold by the hospital.

Paul Degrandis from Oak Street had a question about the Heritage Commission. Do you ever look at a property for reclaimed materials? Can this committee say that those materials need to be reused?

John Merkle said they are not there to design buildings.

Julie said with their letter of decision that demolition proceeds to encourage the salvage of materials and resale.

Doug Flockhart spoke again and said you are not a Historic District Commission and not a Historic Preservation. You are a Heritage Commission. He said he assumes this means your job is to do whatever you can within the limits of the scope of your authority to protect our heritage. To him, that includes the character of the neighborhood, the character of the people who live there, the size and scale and look of the houses in the neighborhood, not just an individual house. The question before you of course is the demolition of an individual house. He would hope since you are a Heritage Commission that you would do your job to preserve the heritage of that neighborhood. If you can't do that or won't do that, then why do you exist?

Jay then asked if there was any other public comment and there was none. Julie said they can close the public hearing and it comes back to the board for a decision. Julie made a motion to close the public hearing on 10 Wadleigh Street. Bill seconded. All were in favor and the public hearing was closed.

Julie said one of the things in the Zoning Ordinance is that we make our decision based on various levels of historic heritage and she thinks this one falls under the retention of a structure that would help preserve or protect a historic place or of historic interest by the town. For her, this building represents a growth pattern and a growth style of that neighborhood and she would request that it be redeveloped.

Jay said when he looked at the property he thinks it adds to the nature and character of the neighborhood and as a mission of the Heritage Commission kind of the test to make in terms of a recommendation and he feels it should be renovated.

Julie made a motion to recommend preservation of this building because it is a historic resource to the heritage of that part of town. John Merkle seconded All were in favor and motion approved.

Bill made a motion to adjourn. Julie seconded. All were in favor and the meeting adjourned at 8:15pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth Herrick
Recording Secretary

