

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, July 17, 2019

4:30 PM

**2nd Floor Committee Room,
City Hall**

Members Present:

Hanspeter Weber, Chair
Andrew Weglinski, Vice Chair
Councilor Thomas Powers
Nancy Proctor
Sam Temple

Staff Present:

Mari Brunner, Planner

Members Not Present:

Erin Benik
Hans Porchitz
Joslin Kimball Frank, Alternate
Dave Bergeron, Alternate

1) Call to Order & Roll Call

Chair Weber called the meeting to order at 4:33 PM and Ms. Brunner conducted roll call.

2) Minutes of Previous Meeting – May 15, 2019

Ms. Proctor moved to approve the minutes of May 15, 2019, which Councilor Powers seconded and the Historic District Commission carried unanimously.

3) Advice & Comment

- a. **Colonial Theater Expansion – Charles Michal, on behalf of owner Colonial Theatre Group, Inc. seeks input on proposed modifications to the main entrance and on the installation of an addition to the rear of the Colonial Theatre building located at 89 Main Street (TMP# 575-008-000-001-001). This property is ranked as a Primary Resource and is located in the Central Business district.**

Ms. Brunner noted this was not an application, but seeking advice and comment on a forthcoming expansion to the Colonial Theater, which is under HDC purview.

Chair Weber recognized Charles Michal, who spoke on behalf of Alec Doyle, Executive Director of the Colonial Theater. Mr. Michal referred to information in the meeting packet as well as imagery and site plans demonstrated at the meeting. Mr. Michal explained that renovations are

necessary for the theater to remain viable as a leading community arts organization contributing to the vitality and attraction of downtown Keene. The nearly 100 year-old building now requires architectural changes that will improve patrons' experiences and expand the theater's ability to serve the community. The owners anticipate a multi-year project, ideally beginning May 2020. Mr. Michal said there are no plans to increase the theater's audience capacity in the existing 888-seat theater, which he noted is on the NH State Register of Historic Places; the historic nature of the auditorium will not be altered or threatened by this project. No changes are proposed to the front façade and its original, iconic marquee.

Mr. Michal used visuals to demonstrate the existing theater, which currently abuts City parking at the rear. He noted mechanical equipment on the west side of the theater at grade; the plan is to replace this equipment and relocate to the roof of the new building. There is currently no backstage area for performers because of the limited, low-ceiling basement. The theater stage is relatively shallow and restricts possible productions. The new expansion will build to the zero lot line and add needed space. While the interior changes are not the HDC's purview, the Commission will need to approve the exterior changes that are proposed to accommodate interior renovations. Today, the theater relies on a hemp and sandbag system to lift and hold production materials, like lights. The Colonial is operated from an intermediate platform above the stage that is accessed by a tall vertical, precarious ladder.

Mr. Michal said this proposed expansion will accommodate a modern rail system with pulleys and a walking grid that will make maintenance above the stage safer and allow more space on the stage and in the theater. The addition will allow for a deeper and higher stage house, suitable for modern productions, and it will provide an upper floor area that is handicap accessible and served by an elevator for many backstage functions. Some brick on the exterior will also be repointed and some windows will be replaced. The proposed expansion will be taller than the existing building, for which a special exemption will be sought from the Zoning Board of Adjustment.

Mr. Michal continued explaining the proposed changes relevant to the HDC. The primary façade on Main Street is three stories tall, with two types of brick: a decorative brick on the lower level and a plain brick higher on the building.

This project will address several problem areas at the theater, beginning at the lobby. In its current configuration, the lobby fills quickly during larger performances, and people have no place to sit while waiting for shows to start or during intermission. The theater entry has a sloped floor that exceeds the pitch allowed for proper handicap access. Patrons at popular events in the winter must wait outside when the ticket lobby is overcrowded before shows. Renovations to the first and second floors will allow people to congregate on a larger flat floor area. New bathrooms on the second floor will be accessible by elevator and current first floor bathrooms will be renovated. The intention is to relocate the existing doors under the marquee closer to the street, though; with this change, there will still be space to congregate inside the primary façade of storefronts; this change to the doors alerted the applicants of the need for HDC approval.

Mr. Michal concluded by explaining remaining proposed changes. On Main Street, most of the planned architectural changes are interior alterations of the entire first-floor building area and a

remodeled second floor (to accommodate an expanded ticket lobby, additional restrooms, a patron lounge, and a dedicated concessions area). He said The Colonial serves roughly 50,000 people annually, more than one third of whom come from out of town. In addition to its year-round offerings of movies and live performances, the theater hosts community and private events, ranging from Keene State College's annual Holocaust Remembrance, to the Keene Lion's Club's annual winter musical, and the Monadnock International Film Festival each spring. Renovations will accommodate shows (such as larger Broadway tours) for which there is inadequate space today and outdated technology. New amenities will make it easier to grow the audience even more. The completed project could also bring additional visitors to Keene, supporting economic development. Mr. Michal welcomed questions.

Mr. Temple asked if the anticipated lobby changes will increase show frequency, theater use, or quality of experience. Mr. Doyle said the expanded lobby space will not change programming but will change the audience experience; the better space will allow people to look forward to arriving pre-show. He hopes people will come into the theater and be more social, especially during colder months. He said the renovations will also increase the theater's longevity and relevance as a non-profit business; the revenue from new concessions will be pivotal. Mr. Temple asked how spaces will be filled and used when the theater is empty; for example, how will the newly empty Brewbakers space be used when there are no shows. Mr. Doyle said the newly empty business spaces will be used to enhance the box office operations, increase public space, and create new opportunities for administrative offices. He said the Brewbakers space, for example, will be an extension of the current box office where patrons can buy tickets during the day.

Chair Weber said from an architectural point of view, that the goal is to increase the evening life of the building and how that is presented to Main Street. Chair Weber recognized Tad Schrantz, Design & Construction Committee Chair, who said he thinks this expansion could facilitate preshow and intermission activities. He hopes with the new comfortable space, people will come to Keene longer in advance and experience the town. He also hopes that the improvements could help attract certain larger touring acts and provide a space for performers to interact with the audience.

Ms. Proctor recalled there is currently a nice open area on Main Street and asked how that space will be incorporated with the renovations. Mr. Michal said they will retain a full panel of four trimmed and detailed poster boards and inlays in the plaster to display information. The outdoor experience on Main Street will remain the same, with space off the sidewalk behind the façade. The Brewbakers steps will be converted into two landings; its left window will become a ticketing area for daytime activity, and the right window will display promotional materials for which there will no longer be space in the current entryway.

Mr. Weglinski asked if the rear elevations will be flat. Mr. Michal used photos to demonstrate the three possible renovations of form, from the perspective of Gilbo Avenue. With the proposed renovations, the addition will not be visible when approaching the theater from Main Street, but will be visible from Gilbo Avenue. He said the rear exterior changes are significant and complex because of the mechanical equipment geometry. All changes are also complicated because even the smallest change can affect sound in the theater. He is working with structural and mechanical

engineers, as well as theater consultants to explore solutions for an attractive exterior addition. The project organizers will explore possible different finishes for the new wall surfaces; the intent, however, is to leave the north and south brick stage house walls intact. Councilor Powers asked about the height change on the addition; Mr. Michal used photos to demonstrate proposed 14' height increase.

Mr. Temple asked if the addition will be visible from the east side of Main Street. Mr. Michal replied that "a sliver" of the east tower wall rising in the perspective distance will be almost imperceptible. He added that there is a long-term intention to install a solar array on the new flat roof. Initially, Mr. Michal thought the most prominent visual impact would be to those who use the Gilbo Avenue parking lot; those familiar with the current experience behind The Colonial will notice prominent change. Visitors approaching from RT-101 and Main Street will see minimal changes. There should be no visual impact from Emerald Street walking north.

Chair Weber asked what shows the renovations will allow compared to today, with the understanding there are other venues in town, like the middle school auditorium, KSC, and new library spaces. Mr. Doyle did not express concern about competition with other performance spaces in town. He is in close contact with library administration as they share many potential donors; still the library and Colonial's operations are very different. The Colonial has also always had a good relationships with KSC and already coordinate programs with them. He noted limited demographics in the region and confirmed he has no intention to detract from other community programs by enhancing the theater; the goal is to draw a larger and broader audience from outside the region because of enhanced programming and artistry. The additional space could accommodate new, heavy-production shows like Broadway tours. Mr. Michal said the new space will provide safer stage facilities and also be more efficient when shows come with predesigned lighting.

Mr. Temple noted that films are not the greatest revenue for the theater, but he asked how this expansion will impact those who value film experiences there. Mr. Doyle thinks the renovations will improve film experiences in the theater, with enhanced media capabilities for higher film quality. He agreed that films are not a significant part of their business plan, compared to the theater programs. Mr. Temple asked if the renovated lobby will be active during weekday film showings, or just for special events. Mr. Doyle said it will be open all the time, with considerations for neighboring restaurants and businesses that theater attendance supports. Chair Weber recognized Dan Belluscio, Chairman of the Facilities Committee for the Colonial Theater advising the renovations, who spoke about the proposed new lobby. He said the lobby will be more open so those from the sidewalk can see activity inside, which is impossible today and will create more activity and interest in the theater. Mr. Doyle agreed and said he believes this renovation will animate the street to a much larger degree than today.

Chair Weber referred to the three possibilities for the new addition design (views from the west) that Mr. Michal displayed at the meeting. Chair Weber stated he preferred the middle option of the three displayed at the meeting; Mr. Temple agreed. Councilor Powers preferred the top option because the mechanical equipment would be invisible. Still, Councilor Powers said he would support the middle option as well. Ms. Proctor agreed that the top or middle option would

be acceptable. Mr. Weglinski said the form will have to accommodate needs on the inside and agreed that the equipment will be less obtrusive in the middle option.

Mr. Weglinski said he thinks less about form and more about materials on the new exterior. Mr. Michal discussed proposed materials for the top and middle options displayed. As presented, the theater and proposed addition are skinned metal buildings with steel frames. The owners have considered brick on the bottom and a deliberately scored series of exterior finish installation panels, where the pattern is less repetitive. He noted there are architectural tricks to deal with mass and bulk, such as darker colors higher on the building, with lighter colors lower. The middle option displayed, with the sloped roof, could be treated with a metal-clad panel system with the faux patina of aged copper. This sloped roof is typical of contemporary systems and will likely make the building look taller from the perspective facing the slope.

Ms. Proctor asked what color was used on the high school addition. Mr. Schrantz said that was a light tan synthetic stucco. Mr. Michal noted how colors and design can help emphasize parts of the building or not.

Ms. Brunner recalled all Commission input provided at this meeting is non-binding and she provided the HDC material standards for building rehabilitation: *Materials used for siding shall be those that are common in the district. Acceptable materials include brick, stone, terra cotta, wood, metal and cement clapboard.* Ms. Brunner noted this materials list is not exhaustive and added that the applicant will have to request a special height exemption from the ZBA, though she was unsure if the HDC would have input on this aspect of the project.

4) Staff Updates

a. Building Better Together www.keenebuildingbetter.com

Ms. Brunner reminded the Commission of this project that staff, community members, and consultants are working on to develop a form based development code for downtown Keene. Staff will present to the HDC again in a few months on project updates that will effect the Commission's purview on new construction downtown.

b. Resource Ranking Effort

Ms. Brunner noted that Mr. Temple and Chair Weber volunteered for the Resource Ranking Subcommittee, in addition to two volunteers from the Heritage Commission. Ms. Brunner will try to schedule the first subcommittee meeting for late July.

5) Next Meeting – August 21, 2019

6) Adjourn

Hearing no further business, Chair Weber adjourned the meeting at 5:37 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Katriona Kibler, Minute Taker
July 22, 2019