

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HERITAGE COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, January 8, 2020

4:00 PM

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

Members Present:

Rose Carey, Co-Chair
Cauley Powell
Susan D'Egidio, Vice Chair
Charlotte Schuerman, Co-Chair
Louise Zerba, Alternate

Staff Present:

Tara Kessler, Senior Planner

Members Not Present:

Erink Benik
Christine Houston

George S. Hansel, Mayor

1) Call to Order/Roll Call

Chair Carey called the meeting to order at 4:00 PM. Roll call was conducted. Chair Carey welcomed Kelly Ballard, who will hopefully will be new member, and Mayor Hansel.

2) Minutes of November 13, 2019

Ms. Powell noted a correction: every reference to “Ms. Benik” should be changed to “Ms. Powell.”

Ms. Powell made a motion to approve the minutes of November 13, 2019 as corrected. Ms. D'Egidio seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

3) Election of Chair & Vice Chair

Chair Carey stated that she asked Ms. Kessler if the Commission could have co-chairs this year, and Ms. Kessler said yes. Ms. Kessler stated that Chapter Two of the City Code does not restrict this from happening, and it is okay with The City Clerk.

Ms. Carey nominated Ms. Schuerman for Co-Chair. Ms. Powell seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Ms. Zerba nominated Ms. Carey for Co-Chair. Ms. Powell seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

Ms. Zerba nominated Ms. D'Egidio for Vice Chair. Ms. Carey seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

4) Adoption of 2020 Meeting Calendar

Chair Carey stated that the proposed 2020 meeting calendar is in the back of the agenda packet. She continued that this Commission meets every other month, on the second Wednesday. She asked why a date is highlighted.

Ms. Kessler stated that the November meeting would be in conflict with Veteran's Day. She continued that typically they would shift it and meet the following day, which would be Thursday, November 12, but they can address this as the date gets closer.

Ms. Zerba made a motion to accept the 2020 meeting calendar as proposed. Chair Carey seconded the motion, which passed by unanimous vote.

5) Discussion with Mayor Hansel on Commission Purpose & Membership

Ms. Kessler stated that Mayor Hansel has asked to come and meet with all boards and Commissions. She continued that he is here today to talk about the Commission's role and membership. She has provided a packet of information, which gives a recap of the Commission's activities since 2015, and a synopsis of the Commission's purpose. This Commission has been an important resource to the city. It predates the Historic District Commission (HDC), and per State statute, is one of the recognized land use boards. It focuses primarily on the promotion and research of historic properties and the city's heritage and culture, whereas the HDC is a quasi-judicial board focused on implementing and overseeing the City's Historic District and its regulations. This group works on programs to celebrate our history, doing outreach and education programs, and inventorying historic properties. There was a time when they were working to establish a lower Main Street Historic District, which was not successful, but they learned a lot from that. They have been spending a lot of time and effort on choosing areas of the city, researching properties in those areas, getting homeowners involved, and involving the community to recognize the assets here in Keene.

Ms. Kessler continued that during the past three years they have successfully been awarded grants from the NH Division of Historical Resources to do this annual workshop series. Even before that, the Commission was hosting Sunday Concert Series – concerts were held at different

historic properties in Keene, and Chair Carey and other members shared information on the history of the buildings. It was a great way to pair history and culture.

She continued that in 2017 they began the workshop series, beginning with “how to research the history of your home,” and “tips for restoring an old home,” and a very successful walking tour of the School Street neighborhood, with over 100 people involved. Almost all property owners in that area were actively involved. The Commission has had six workshops so far, with about 80 to 100 people in attendance at each. Last year was “Cooking Up History,” to highlight historic agricultural products in the region. There was an overview of the history of agriculture in Keene, and an Urban Barn Tour along Washington Street this summer. This year they will work with a consultant to inventory urban carriage houses and barns in the Washington Street neighborhood, so there is a better sense of what resources are there, so before buildings are proposed for demolition they can share that information with property owners, as well as information on how to preserve those historic resources.

Ms. Kessler continued that they are in the midst of applying for another grant to take all the information this Commission has been working on and develop an online walking tour of the different properties that have been inventoried, and to compile an online, searchable database, so if you wanted to look up a property you can see all the information gathered to date. This would be a tool for citizens to use.

Ms. Ballard asked if people would be able to upload their own information to the database. She continued that she has been researching the history of her house, and knows someone who lived in the house 20 years ago, and maybe it is like that for other people, too – maybe others have photos from your house from a long time ago.

Ms. Kessler replied that that is a great idea. She continued that this is a task the Commission has been trying to do for a long time, but there is limited staff support and they have not been able to develop these tools. They want to get a consultant to help. The grant application is due in February and they are working on it now.

She continued that there are other projects the Commission has been involved in. In 2015 they helped with work on the Stone Arch Bridge, drainage improvements to protect that resource, and they have been in conversations with other departments in the City and other committees, regarding the concept of the Transportation Heritage Trail, moving all the way into Swanzey. A key piece of that is finalize Stone Arch Bridge improvements. The bridge is owned by the NH Department of Transportation (NH DOT) and is on the National Registrar of Historic Places. It has no fall protection now, so the plan has always been to restore the capstones with the same aesthetic as the original bridge, which had layers of granite capstones, which were removed during the railroad time. They have been looking for grant funding to support the design and construction of that. They have also talked about inventorying the other Stone Arch Bridge on Court Street as a resource.

Chair Carey asked if they can add the barn inventory to the grant application, not just the walking tour. Ms. Kessler replied yes. She continued that the City has had a lot of work done by consultants in the downtown, such as formal inventories of structures on Washington Street, and the Historical Society has a lot of information too, so partnering with them would be to everyone's advantage. She will be working on that grant application and will sent it out to the full group beforehand for feedback. Chair Carey stated that she is available for that as well.

Ms. Kessler stated that regarding membership, for a while this Commission had four or five members, then had full membership, and now has vacancies again. She continued that the Councilor position has been vacant. She is not sure if there is interest among the City Council, but this Commission would like to have a Councilor serve. Ms. Ballard is interested in joining as a regular member. She is not sure if there are other prospective members. Chair Carey stated that she does not have any names to put forward at this time. Ms. D'Egidio replied that she does not, either.

Chair Carey asked if they can dismiss the term limits for members. Ms. Kessler replied that The City Clerk, in the past, has said that there needs to be justification for why this Commission would be exempt from term limits and they would have to make a change to the City Code. Discussion ensued. Mayor Hansel stated that he is wary of changing the Code. He continued that there are many boards and Commissions that would like to have no term limits. But changeover is good, and it is good to have new members, in general. He thinks there are some workarounds to make it work for the individual circumstances of the boards and Commissions, and he would prefer that to changing the Code. For example, a regular member can be appointed as an alternate. He thanks Ms. Ballard for showing interest and does not foresee a problem in nominating her to be a member. He will see if any of the Councilors are interested in joining.

Mayor Hansel thanked the Commission for having him today, and stated that he wanted to introduce himself so everyone can associate a face with the name. Anyone is welcome to stop by and talk with him during his office hours (11:00 AM to noon, Monday through Friday), or to make an appointment. He supports the Commission's work, and enjoyed the urban barn tour. The Commission's work is important. He lives in an old home, and also has been having a lot of conversations with people about renovating and weatherizing older homes. He has had conversations with different groups, businesses, and the college, and is looking to do some sort of pilot project, similar to the renovations the Putnam family has done with some of the historic homes on Court Street. The idea is to have several organizations do a project together, to show what can be done to update a historic home to modern standards, to maintain and protect them. They want to maintain the look and feel of the community while having the modern housing that people want and that attracts people from outside the area. A good place to start is get a group of people together to do some kind of project.

Chair Carey replied that that sounds like the potential for a 2022 CLG Grant workshop. Mayor Hansel stated that if this group can lend suggestions to that effort, there is interest out there. Having a historic angle would get people excited.

Ms. Zerba asked, if the City is able to provide funding. Mayor Hansel replied that he is not thinking of this as a City-funded project. He continued that that would be tricky – the City cannot help private property owners fix their properties. He is thinking of it as crowd-sourced. For example, having three large businesses pitch in to fund having one historic house fixed up to house multiple families. He is just putting the idea out there; maybe it will build momentum.

Ms. D'Egidio asked, if there is not a criteria of having a building that is privately-owned or business-owned? Mayor Hansel replied that they would probably be looking at a cooperative, like a condo association that would have multiple owners and they would all have a stake in it.

Ms. Ballard stated that many houses are broken up into apartments. She continued that there are grants to help landlords do energy efficiency work on their buildings. Would that be looked at? Showing that it can be done with a historic house? Mayor Hansel replied that that is part of it. He continued that he sees this as a component of a broader weatherization and renovation program. They are laying out broad strokes for such a program. It is to generate interest in renovating older homes, and bringing in partners who can contribute. Discussion continued. Chair Carey mentioned the NH Preservation Alliance as a possible resource.

Ms. Kessler stated that when they were working on the idea of the Lower Main Street Historic District, there was concern from residents about the imposition of another layer of regulations, when what they really wanted help with was funding to do the work/improvements. She continued that the Commission took that feedback and talked about establishing a technical assistance fund. It did not launch, but that is maybe something to revisit. Mayor Hansel replied that a component of the weatherization and renovation program would be technical assistance for single- family or two-family homes, which would bring together all the rebates and pots of money. There is a lot of housing money out there but the problem is it is only accessible to large developers. It would be tremendous to get it available to private homeowners. It requires creativity. His attitude is "Let's just do something." He wants to find a house that would work well for some kind of pilot, and bring in several partners to invest in it, then do the project, get publicity, and take that and scale it and approach it that way. He welcomes ideas and help.

Ms. Kessler stated that another, separate program is the local plaque program that seeks to award, each year, a local resident or business owner with a plaque to recognize the work that they have done to their home or business.

Ms. Kessler stated that the Monadnock Energy Resource Initiative was formed eight years ago to create a barn-raiser model for doing energy efficiency and solar installations in the region. She continued that volunteers formed a board and come together under the umbrella of a nonprofit. They choose homeowners who are willing to open their homes up for weatherization improvements, and they get an assortment of skilled professionals to do the deep energy retrofits with the assistance of volunteers and materials. Then the homeowner has to open their home up for a weekend, for people to learn as the professionals do the work and people volunteer, and then the homeowner pays it forward to three other homes.

Mayor Hansel stated that that reminds him of another initiative he is brainstorming about: a neighbor helping neighbor campaign. He continued that in his neighborhood when a member of the neighborhood falls on hard times – for example, breaks a leg - people volunteer to help out, mow their lawn, and so on and so forth. He is thinking of doing a whole campaign, involving the college and other groups that might have an interest, to build camaraderie among people.

Ms. Kessler stated that it is impressive how much excitement and pride this Commission has generated in neighborhoods by asking people to share photos and stories of their homes and get involved with sharing the history of their homes, thinking about who lived where and how things have changed in the neighborhood. Mayor Hansel replied that they had a broad array of people at the walking tour, which was nice. Ms. D'Egidio stated that there were at least three houses that because they were on the tour did landscaping and painting and spruced everything up. That was a great surprise. Ms. Kessler added that the School Street tour attracted people from all over the state. Chair Carey stated that the history of different neighborhoods is also significant. She continued that it would be of value to identify neighborhoods' histories – for example, one used to be an Italian neighborhood and there is a family that has been there for 150 years. It would be great to develop a history of who moved in and when. Some neighborhoods have industrial history. They might find a building like Mayor Hansel is talking about. Ms. Kessler replied that that is consistent with the Comprehensive Master Plan, doing neighborhood planning. Mayor Hansel stated that he is looking at neighborhoods very intensely. He continued that he wants to make sure they are on all the same playing field. He wants to make sure people are proud to live in whatever Keene neighborhood they live in. It is about building pride and camaraderie among neighbors, and the historical significance of the neighborhoods plays right into that.

Chair Carey stated that last year or the year before, the Commission sent information, to anyone who owns a home 50 years or older, about what it means to own a historic home. That brings people into an awareness about their neighborhood. She gave an example of a Keene neighborhood. Discussion continued.

Ms. Powell asked if there is a map of Keene with the defined neighborhoods. Chair Carey replied no, she is saying it would be good to research and begin to define them. Ms. Zerba stated that she heard the School Street neighborhood was considered a transition zone, which sounds counterproductive. Ms. Kessler replied that she can talk with her more about the proposed zoning update – staff has been working more with that neighborhood lately. Ms. Zerba stated that those are mostly single-family homes and she would hate to see that change. Ms. Kessler replied that those concerns are on staff's radar and they are working on it.

6) CLG Grant FY 2021 Application

7) Updates:

- a. CLG Grant FY 2020 Urban Barn Survey**
- b. Stone Arch Bridge Improvements/Proposed Keene Transportation Heritage Trail**

Ms. Kessler reported that she met with the Bicycle Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee (BPPAC) about the Stone Arch Bridge, requesting that BPPAC partner with the Heritage Commission if they are working on the Transportation Heritage Trail. There could be opportunities for synergy between the two committees and also with Pathways for Keene and City staff, to talk about the steps to take. She continued that there is not an official plan yet, with the exception of The City Engineer and the Parks, Recreation, and Facilities Director phasing out different elements of construction to go into the Capital Improvement Plan. They talked about this group having resources and experience in researching the history of the corridor, being able to tell stories about it, and to get public awareness and support. There is a lot that needs to take place before they get to that stage.

Ms. Kessler continued that BPPAC was interested in developing a subcommittee to work with members of this committee. They could have an introductory meeting and see where to go from there – e.g. how do they work together, what is each committee’s role. They could talk about pursuing grant funding for Stone Arch Bridge improvements, outreach, and how they might tailor an outreach program. There were ideas such as a “pocket park” at the end of Eastern Avenue today to get people excited about the possibilities. There is no coordinated effort. The Commission could help with that.

Ms. Kessler continued that she included that in the CLG grant letter of intent for the next fiscal year and was told that they were not eligible, and they were referred to the Land & Community Heritage Investment Program (LCHIP) grant instead. They will need to sit down and talk about that. She needs to do some research about what other projects are happening in Keene and who is seeking LCHIP funding now. This is the only source of funding out there for these large brick and mortar projects for restoring historic buildings. Discussion ensued. Ms. Kessler stated that she needs to get more information about the next LCHIP round. The next step would be an application for that.

Ms. Kessler stated that the grant application for 2021 is due on the first week of February, so she and Chair Carey will be working to put that together. Regarding the current grant application, for a consultant to do the barn inventory, she just finalized a scope of work, which she shared with Commission members for review. Commission members can look at it and email her any comments or concerns.

Chair Carey asked when BPPAC meets. Ms. Kessler replied that second Wednesday of each month at 8:15 AM, so the next meeting is February 12. Chair Carey asked if they want to have a subcommittee to go to that. Ms. Kessler replied that for the subcommittee they would set up a date outside of the two meetings for people to talk specifically about this project. Discussion ensued. Per the Commission’s interest in having a joint meeting with the BPPAC, Ms. Kessler stated that she will talk with the staff liaison for the BPPAC and see if the Heritage Commission could join the BPPAC meeting on February 12. She continued that she knows they have pretty full agendas, but she will see.

c. Demolition Review Subcommittee

- 8) New or Other Business**
- 9) Next Meeting – March 11, 2020**
- 10) Adjourn**

The meeting adjourned at 4:47 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker