

City of Keene
New Hampshire

HERITAGE COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

Wednesday, October 14, 2020

4:00 PM

Remote Meeting via Zoom

Members Present:

Rose Carey, Co-Chair
Susan D'Egidio
Louise Zerba, Alternate
Charlotte Schuerman, Co-Chair
Kelly Eagan Ballard
Cauley Powell
Councilor Gladys Johnsen (4:15 PM)

Staff Present:

Tara Kessler, Senior Planner

Members Not Present:

Erin Benik

Ms. Kessler read a prepared statement explaining how the Emergency Order #12, pursuant to Executive Order #2020-04 issued by the Governor of New Hampshire, waives certain provisions of RSA 91-A (which regulates the operation of public body meetings) during the declared COVID-19 State of Emergency.

1) Call to Order

Co-Chair Carey called the meeting to order at 4:03 PM. Roll call was conducted.

2) Minutes of Previous Meeting – August 19, 2020 and September 15, 2020

Ms. Kessler stated that the draft minutes might not have reached everyone, because there have been technical difficulties, so the Commission can postpone adopting the meeting minutes if they want to. Discussion ensued and Co-Chair Carey stated that they will postpone this until the next meeting. Ms. Kessler clarified that if any member of the public asks to see the minutes, Staff would provide them with the draft minutes, as they are public. But the minutes will not be posted on the City's website until the Commission adopts them.

3) Discussion on Neighborhood Heritage Projects

Ms. Kessler stated that this is a continuation from last month's meeting – the topic of different neighborhoods to consider exploring for doing neighborhood engagement projects. She created a map for the Commission to use.

Co-Chair Carey stated that they talked about supporting the Mayor's "21 in 21" project, which is rehabilitating 21 houses in this coming year, by aligning any neighborhood heritage project with this effort. She continued that part of that project focuses on specific neighborhoods. The Commission talked earlier about helping to identify historic neighborhoods in Keene and maybe doing a pictorial essay and research on these neighborhoods or documenting their unique development and stories. They can talk about other ways to support the Mayor in his drive to bring public awareness to the neighborhoods. The neighborhood surrounding Patricia Russell Park is of potential interest as there is a City project underway to design and redevelop the park and it is in close proximity to a diverse population of residents with respect to age and income. The Commission has the opportunity now to talk among themselves and share ideas about how to move forward, or not, with this project. She would like to hear people's thoughts. The Commission will also be supporting the Urban Barn & Carriage House research project this year.

Ms. D'Egidio asked what the question for the Commission is, regarding Patricia Russell Park. Ms. Ballard asked where the park is. Ms. Kessler replied that it is downtown, near Church St., across from Beaver Brook. She showed it on a map on the screen. Brief discussion ensued about the location. Ms. Kessler stated that it is mostly it is used for recreational programming now, but there is a design project happening right now to reimagine and development a design and construction plan for the park. Currently the plan shows a destination playground, increased access to the park, a new walking trail along Beaver Brook, and upgrading the recreation field. COVID-19 has changed plans but it was intended to be a pretty significant outreach project in that neighborhood. Discussion continued about the location of the Park.

Ms. Powell asked, with regards to the neighborhoods in general and this Pat Russell Park area, what they are calling the boundaries and how the boundaries are being decided, and is that the project the Commission is being asked to do? Are they being asked to find cultural delineations for the various parts of Keene that would justify it as a unique, separate neighborhood? Co-Chair Carey replied that that was part of her understanding – helping pull together what they can find about the histories and timeframes of when the neighborhoods were developed. She asked Ms. Kessler if that is her understanding.

Ms. Kessler replied that in the early months of this year, when the Mayor talked with the Commission, he had an idea about neighborhood engagement but not yet a defined project and was supportive of what the Commission might undertake with respect to neighborhood planning as it relates to the mission of the Commission. She noted that this proposed project has not yet been defined and there are important questions to consider. For example, narrowing in on a general geographic area is important, but what happens once a neighborhood area is picked? What is the project, what is the task? Keene does not have clearly-defined neighborhoods. Part of it would be trying to delineate what the area of the neighborhood is, based on certain criteria

that the Commission would come up with. However, the focus would be on the history of the neighborhood and on its heritage. She continued that if part of the project's focus is trying to brand the historic identity of the neighborhood area then there would need to be criteria to determine the boundaries or what makes the neighborhood unique, what are some themes they see in the development of the neighborhood, and so on and so forth.

Ms. Zerba asked if the Mayor is asking the Commission to determine the neighborhoods, instead of the City Council or Staff. She asked if all of the 21 homes in the project would be in the same neighborhood. She is unclear.

Ms. Kessler replied that she does not think the Mayor was expecting anything in particular from the Commission with respect to "21 in 21". She continued that when he came in February it was to introduce himself and get to know the Commission better and express the types of projects he wanted to explore. There seemed to be a link between his interests and the Commission's work and interests, but he did not have a direct ask for the Commission to take on any specific projects. The "21 in 21" project is related in that it addresses a project at the neighborhood scale, but, at the moment, it does have a geographic focus and the program details have not been decided on yet. It is her understanding that this project is in its early stages, and the focus is on identifying a geographic area to invest grant dollars or other dollars into properties that are on the decline, to bring them back, through exterior modifications, energy efficiency retrofits, interior modifications, etc. That project is early in its development and is a partnership with Southwestern Community Services (SCS).

Ms. Zerba asked if this conversation is premature then. Ms. Kessler replied the Commission has talked about the fact that the "21 in 21" project is happening and there may be benefits to tying into it, if possible. The Commission has talked about neighborhood planning prior to the conversation with the Mayor. What she took from the conversations was that if there is an opportunity to work together, great, and it seems like the Mayor would be supportive of the Commission's work in neighborhood planning. Furthermore, if there would be an opportunity to connect the neighborhood planning to another project that is already out there, even better, because there is more synergy that could happen. But it is up to the Commission. No one from the City is currently relying on the Commission to take on this work, but it is good work and exciting to think about. No one else is currently talking about identifying the history or heritage of neighborhoods or defining neighborhoods that way.

Ms. D'Egidio asked: Regarding 21 in 21, once the neighborhoods are identified, are the 21 properties exclusive to one neighborhood or can they be in different neighborhoods? Ms. Kessler replied that she is not sure, but she thinks there is an interest in containing it in one geographic area for the impact it would have to the neighborhood. But depending on the funding obtained, it might end up being a very different project from the current proposal.

Co-Chair Carey stated that Patricia Russell Park is also close to the rail trail. She continued that the Commission had talked with the Bicycle Pedestrian Path Advisory Committee (BPPAC) and

Charles (Chuck) Redfern at their last meeting about how the Commission's research would also help his project, by having the heritage documented. She needs to work with him some more about the letter of support the Commission said they would give to him for that project. Ms. Kessler stated that she has a draft for Co-Chair Carey and will email it to her.

Ms. Ballard stated that one positive about the COVID-19 is that it has forced everyone online. She continued that this could be thus more inclusive and accessible, because everyone is online now. She has researched her own house and street. She wonders if there is information out there, about Keene neighborhoods' history, which this small group of people just does not know. They could ask the Historical Society and others who are keenly interested in local history. There has been a lot of remodeling going on lately and people might have more of this information than the Commission knows.

Co-Chair Carey replied that there are many residents who know the history and they might come forward with it if the Commission does a campaign to let people know they are researching neighborhoods and would like to talk or email with people who are knowledgeable about where they are living. Ms. Ballard replied that there are people who live and die in Keene. There is a lot of history here that is accessible. People like to be asked, so there might be a way to ask. Co-Chair Carey replied that maybe they could do that through the local TV station - maybe they could have a program, or bulletins. And yes, the Historical Society. She asked if Ms. Kessler knows another way. Ms. Kessler replied that The Shopper goes in all local mailboxes. Co-Chair Carey replied that she is still writing for The Shopper so she could ask if she could write a guest article there.

Ms. Kessler stated that they could do a press release/some kind of language to be shared in many places, if the Commission had a plan for how to collect stories and information and put it into an article, they could put it in the Chamber of Commerce newsletter, share it the with neighborhood groups on Facebook, and so on and so forth. She continued that the City has about 1,000 subscribers to their email list. They could send it out to multiple platforms. They do not need to pay to do this; it can be free. Co-Chair Carey replied that she will start working on the verbiage. She asked if Ms. Ballard wants to help with that. Ms. Ballard replied yes. There is a lot of information the Commission is missing, that other people have, so there is no need to do all the legwork themselves. Co-Chair Carey replied yes, it sounds like a very practical way to begin. She asked if everyone agrees with moving forward in this direction.

Ms. Powell stated that she is still confused about the project. She asked, is the Commission drawing these preliminary lines on the map of Keene and then defining the neighborhoods themselves? Would they be inadvertently affecting people's property values if people are defined as not being part of a specific region that they wanted to be a part of or thought they were a part of? Should the Commission coordinate with anyone else, like another committee, to determine how to define neighborhoods, or is this based just on heritage? Are they doing this for all of Keene or just one area? Co-Chair Carey replied that she agrees that they have to look at

the full scope – when they start in on this, where does it take them, and what impact does it have for everyone?

Ms. Zerba asked if Co-Chair Carey was thinking of sending letters to mostly people in the Church St. neighborhood, or all over Keene. Co-Chair Carey replied that she had not thought to mail any letters. Ms. Zerba replied that she was thinking about the article in the paper. Co-Chair Carey replied it would talk about ideas and give people a way to respond. She continued that people could respond even to the whole concept of identifying neighborhoods, and whether they want to look at it more comprehensively, and if they really have the ability and right to define the neighborhoods, and whether it will impact real estate values. That is a good question that she had not thought about. Maybe it is about loosely drawing an area or circle, not necessarily a line.

Co-Chair Carey asked Ms. Kessler where they go with this, if it is now becoming a political question to some extent. Ms. Kessler replied that those are all important questions. When the Commission talks about neighborhood planning she always assumed that since it is the Heritage Commission, it was about trying to identify historic neighborhoods and understand the history of neighborhoods. People talk about “East Keene” and “North Central Keene,” neighborhoods just based on cardinal directions, and there is the Maple Acres subdivision, for example. When the Commission has talked about neighborhood planning and projects she assumed it would be, for example, exploring the history of the Island St. neighborhood, how it became developed, what it looked like when it was developed, who lived there, and what the heritage of the place is. That is a more benign project than creating more broadly focused neighborhood plans, which should be more bottom-up, planned by what the neighborhoods themselves see and want for their future and what their goals are. The Commission’s neighborhood planning is more about history. She stated she thought Ms. Ballard’s idea of reaching out to people and starting there is a great step. It gets engagement from the neighborhoods instead coming in with a predetermined proposal. Sometimes people get concerned when they start reaching out, thinking there might be a historic district coming and regulations to follow. But reaching out and getting people interested in sharing what they know about their homes and neighborhoods is something that has fewer issues; it is not like picking a place and drawing lines around a place. But even if they were to do that, if they did it from the historical perspective it is within the Commission’s roles and responsibilities as written in the City Code to do this research. That is how the Historic District was formed. That is what they did in the Lower Main St. area. They have done similar projects on Washington St. and Court St.

Ms. Zerba replied that she likes that a lot. She continued that she likes the idea of writing articles to get people excited about sharing the history of their properties that they have done the research on. Maybe they can do something similar to what Phil Falkner did, and have a picture of the home along with the history that has been discovered. She continued that she thinks they should wait on proposing involvement with “21 in 21” until they are asked.

Co-Chair Carey stated that she agrees very much. She continued that another way she had envisioned this project is: the Commission has been working with barns and the agricultural

development of Keene, and tracking that agricultural development into how the workers began to cluster in certain areas, and the factories and factory workers, and that began to define areas. She would like to see it as a progression of how the city as a whole developed, and how the agriculture moved further and further out. This would allow them to tie it to the barn and carriage house research they have been doing. It would allow them to look at the city as a whole, rather than single out any particular area, but it would also allow them to research given areas as they developed. It is a broader way to go, and more time-consuming, but less political and accomplishes the same goal.

Ms. Ballard stated that she does not think they have enough information to even think about defining neighborhoods. She continued that maybe it is because she has not lived in Keene very long, but she does not know which neighborhoods were “all factory workers” or “all Italian” or so on and so forth. She learned about the history of her own street, and people on her street and their occupations and it was fascinating. She feels like that information is out there and she is sure other people are excited about it, too. There are lots of historical directories to learn from, which were published every two years. People love to be asked about what they know. And yes, she agrees with Ms. Zerba about not seeking involvement in “21 in 21”.

Co-Chair Carey replied that she was not intending for the Commission to be a part of “21 in 21”; she meant for them to be in *support* of that project. She continued that researching neighborhoods would help bring in the interest. And this is another way to engage residents.

Ms. Kessler stated that she thinks the best method would be for the Commission to have a website that people can upload photos to and use to share their information. She continued that the City has had more project-oriented websites in recent years. She gave examples of others. She continued that a website might be a great tool for this. She offered to help with this task. Co-Chair Carey replied that she would love a website. Ms. Ballard replied that she loves the idea, too. Ms. Zerba agreed. Brief discussion continued and Co-Chair Carey stated that she would be glad to help with colors and font/the aesthetics of the website.

Ms. Zerba asked if Co-Chair Carey could, before the next meeting, think about what she wants to write in the article and then the Commission could discuss that, along with Ms. Kessler’s research about the website. Co-Chair Carey replied that she and Ms. Ballard can get together and talk about that. Ms. Kessler stated that she will get a website started and Co-Chair Carey and anyone else who wants to give input can, and at the next meeting, they can talk about what features they want to see. Discussion ensued about website features and maps. Ms. Ballard shared ideas for what an interactive map could be like, allowing people to upload their information to share on the map. Co-Chair Carey stated that the Commission has done a lot of work on the Washington St. and School St. areas and thus have some data they could load into the map. Discussion continued. Co-Chair Carey stated that it would be a wonderful way to be able to collect information, if it could be done. Ms. Kessler stated that the grant the Commission applied for last fall, which she will resubmit for them, was for funding to build a more professional website/a content management system. It was less about collecting information but

would have been about the walking tours and disseminating the information the Commission has collected over the past 20 years.

Ms. Zerba asked if they would need permission from the property owners whose information they will be sharing. Co-Chair Carey replied that the permission was given at the time of information collection. Ms. Kessler stated that if information was collected from public records it would be legal for the Commission to share it, although it would be good for them to let the property owners know.

Co-Chair Carey stated that there are things for them to work on between now and the next meeting. She asked if there was anything they needed to vote on. Ms. Zerba replied that she does not think so, because they are gathering information.

Ms. Powell stated that it almost sounds like two different projects. She continued that they do not want to guide people too much; they want to hear their stories and hear what information they have about their homes and properties, and receive whatever they want to share. But then maybe there should also be, thinking about the website, a more formal/structured database that they are creating an interactive element to. For that they would want to have specific categories of information. Should they be delineating those elements they want to be asking for or receiving? For example, build date, builder, owners, sellers, events like fires, cultural happenings, important people living there, and so on and so forth.

Ms. Zerba replied that they have quite a few items on the inventory forms; maybe they could just use those. Co-Chair Carey replied yes, those inventory forms have many items, but they also want to get more personal and find out about not just the houses, but the people who lived in them. Some 'founding fathers' lived in the early houses. Ms. Ballard replied that maybe that is the piece that helps them tell more stories about the houses, if they are going back further. She continued that she is also thinking structurally, about how houses have transformed over time; it would be fascinating to have that information.

Ms. Kessler stated that in response to Ms. Powell's thoughts about categories, when a person is applying to have a property listed on a national register of historic places, there are categories for the applicant to address. She showed a list on the screen, and stated that they may not be the exact categories to use, but they cover a lot of what Ms. Powell was mentioning, such as setting, materials, design, location, workmanship, and so on and so forth. These are the types of information that might lead to the characterization of the history of a property, including the stories of people who lived there before. This might be a place to start.

Ms. Powell stated that it gets her thinking that maybe a future project would be an oral history project, if they are able to get information from people and they have the beginnings of a database or reference tool for the properties themselves, then they start associating people recording and filming the stories. She does not know if Keene has an archive of oral histories. Ms. Zerba replied that they have a few oral histories, such as of the railroads, and those are

housed at the Historical Society and the Library, and there are others that she cannot remember at the moment. Ms. Powell replied that maybe they could make it a goal to start collecting stories from older residents. Ms. Ballard suggested they reach out to residents in local nursing homes, and talk with people who used to live in these houses. She continued that nursing homes are another place to let people know the Commission is looking for this information. Ms. Kessler stated that the Library used to host “Story Circles” but she cannot remember the details, so she will look into it and ask other Staff how that worked.

4) Updates

Ms. D’Egidio stated that at the last meeting they were talking about the barn on Marlboro St. She continued that she has 20 good pictures of the interior and exterior. She asked if she should send them to Ms. Kessler. Ms. Kessler replied yes, she will be able to receive them at her work email address. Ms. D’Egidio stated that there was no Colony family connection, but the pictures are great and she will forward them.

5) Next Meeting

Co-Chair Carey asked if they should meet again in one month or two. After brief discussion, the group decided to meet in November, on the second Wednesday.

There being no further business, Co-Chair Carey adjourned the meeting at 4:55 PM.

Respectfully submitted by,
Britta Reida, Minute Taker

Reviewed and edited by: Tara Kessler, Senior Planner.
Additional edits by: Katie Kibler, Clerk's Office.